# The Making of a Marriage

## (Roumela-Alfresun)

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It is a story
with many sidelights
on administration
and the management of men and affairs
and the setting is a semi-feudal society.

# The Making of a Marriage

## (Roumela–Alfresun)

"A perfect Woman, nobly planned
To warn, to comfort and command."

A. D. Gorwala

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# I

Startled at the thud, the Assistant Collector looked up from the village-map he had been studying for the last five minutes and saw lying at his feet a fine mallard that had dropped straight there. A moment later another hurtled into the watercourse by the side of which he was standing. Good shooting, thought the Assistant Collector, right in the head he gets them, so that they plummet straight down. Wondering who the marksman was, he bent to pull the second bird out of the water before it got lost behind the bushes along the watercourse's side or disappeared with the current. Breaking off some of the long grass that grew by the watercourse he tied the feet of the two birds together and got up smiling, thinking he might end up, if the sportsman didn't appear, two plump wild duck to the good. He had finished the task he had been engaged on and was now ready to begin the five-mile walk that would take him to his camp and well-deserved breakfast. He had been crossing fields since five-thirty. It was now seven and the sun was just coming up.

"What a business it is," thought the Assistant Collector, as he started back, the duck dangling from his left hand and the rolled-up village-map under his arm, "not to be able to take things for granted. I felt doubtful yesterday morning during inspection about

the correctness of the field-book entries of the mode of irrigation of some of these survey numbers. And so here I am, having to walk ten miles this morning and on top of that to hold an investigation against the village and taluka officers who made and passed the entries, and probably to have to take proceedings against them. Anyhow, there's no doubt the entries are wrong; all the fields on this side of the watercourse are flow, not flow aided by lift, making a nice little difference of about Rs. 2000 in the assessment. Now is it just carelessness and laziness, the village officer not bothering to see for himself and accepting whatever he was told by the zemindar's agent, the taluka officer too not bothering, or was it something much worse, a passing of a part of the saving to them ? Well, we shall have to try and find out. This, after all, is administration, as my first Collector used to say, whenever there was a particularly nasty business in the offing."

Thus musing, the Assistant Collector walked on, his eyes on the uneven ground, suddenly to be held up by a shrill shout, "Hey, you, what are you doing with my birds ? Hand them over at once. Why are you on this land anyhow ? How dare you be here ?" Looking up, he saw approaching him a handsome, fresh-faced boy of about fifteen, clad in the Western style, shooting jacket, breeches and soft-leather high-boots, with a karakul fur cap pressed well-down his forehead. Flushed with indignation the boy demanded, "Answer, answer at once, or it will be worse for you." The Assistant Collector, who was dressed in the local style, except for puttees round the legs of his baggy pyjamas right down to his stout-soled country-made shoes, drew his coarse shawl more tightly around him as he crossed his arms on his chest in respect and bowing low said, "Your servant trembles at your wrath, noble Sir. He is but an ordinary passer-by, who thought he would take a short cut by following the watercourse. He neither did, nor means, your land any harm. These ducks he found on his way as he was passing; one he rescued from the watercourse, where but for him, it might have been lost. He tied them together and carried them along meaning to restore them to whoever shot them, if he came across him. If you did, they're yours, of course they are yours." "Hand them over, then, and go back the way you've come, follow the track to the right from the head of the watercourse and you'll

soon be on the main road. Come on, come on, lay them down there. I've no time to waste." "What a thing it is to be young!" sighed the Assistant Collector, "So handsome and so peremptory! But your servant has still not been told who shot them. He would restore them only to the rightful owner." "Bandying words with me!" cried the youth, "Realise, oh man, that all this land is my father's, as far as the eye of man can reach from the top of that high tree there. I shot them, of course, silly man. Who else would, or even could!" "With all respect your servant salutes you, oh worthy scion of your noble house," said the Assistant Collector bowing again, "your servant knows better of course than to cast any doubt on your words. What you have said must undoubtedly be so. Your servant, however, has the besetting sin of curiosity, which you out of your usual generosity will no doubt pardon. He sees no weapon in your hand. You shot the duck, they are yours, but where, oh most appropriate amalgam of grace and courage, is your weapon?" "Enough of this," cried the youth, by now tempestuously angry, "if you will not hand over my game, take this, and learn what it is to cross me," at the same time in one smooth movement pulling a sharp dagger from the belt round his waist and flinging it straight at the Assistant Collector's throat.

Truly, the Preserver was nearer than the Destroyer that morning, for the throw was expert, and had the Assistant Collector not, almost intuitively, happened to move his head slightly, the dagger to the hilt would have been buried in his throat. As it was, it cut through the fold of the shawl next to his neck and passed beyond. "Ah, ha," cried the Assistant Collector as he rushed forward to seize the boy, then coming to a sudden halt near him, stretched his right arm back, and landed a full-length resounding slap on the boy's left cheek. The arm swept on in a rythmic follow-through and was just beginning its backward movement, intended to let the outside of the hand crash on the opponent's right cheek, when suddenly it stopped in mid-air and the Assistant Collector fell back horrified. The slap had made the boy reel back and his fur cap tumbling off had loosened the hair tightly bundled together on the head, so that it now fell in long tresses all round the face, turning it from that of an imperious boy to that of a very vital, lovely woman. "God forgive me, I ask a thousand pardons of you, lady. Had I known what you were, my hand could

have been burnt to ashes before it ever fell in anger across your cheek. Your indulgence I crave, nobility, for this most grievous error. At your feet I lay your game and crave permission to depart," said the Assistant Collector piteously. The lady, who had by now recovered her poise, though still feeling her cheek which had flushed deep-red and seemed beginning to swell, smiled through the tears she had not been able to keep from her eyes at the pain of the blow and said, "Take it not to heart so much, friend. After all, I deserved the slap, for in my rage I would have killed you, and nearly did. Would to God you had a less furious hand for I shall carry the mark of your fingers on my cheek for at least a fortnight, and the pain too seems likely to last for more than a week in spite of all the lavings with rose-water and powdered almond that I shall devote to it. Still, never mind, when you knew me as I was, a woman, you would not hit me and begged my pardon. Because of that, I bear no grudge for the blow. Nay, I feel friendly towards you. Poor you may be, but you are truly gentle. Depart then with my blessing, and to help you on your way, here is something," and taking from her pocket a gold half-ashrafi, she stepped forward and put it in his hand, still with her other hand on her burning cheek. "Peace be with you always, most gracious," said the Assistant Collector, "and all happiness be yours" as he turned in the direction from which he had come, only to switch round again at a tremendous shout of "Stop, rogue, stop. Do not flee from certain death."

A tall soldierly young man with the shoulders of an ox came rushing up, axe in hand and cried out, "I saw you strike the lady. Now fight and die or die without fighting. You, I will not spare." "Well," said the Assistant Collector, "I have no weapon to fight with except this three-foot rolled-up map. But since it is your will to fight, so be it. Come." As the young man paused a second, the lady rushed forward and seizing him by the arm called out, "Oh, please, dear, do stop being foolish. This good man is not to blame at all. Didn't you see me fling the dagger at him and miss his throat by less than a tenth of an inch?" "No, I didn't," said the young man, "but how dare he strike you anyhow?" "He didn't know I was a woman. He thought I was a nasty boy, just as someone else did before. Remember?" asked the lady in a very special voice. The young man blushed all over his face, "Well, if that is so . . ."

"It is, indeed," emphasised the lady. "Now let this good fellow go about his business in peace, while we turn back to the glade for our picnic, though for me the picnic and all meals will have to be just liquid for Heaven knows how long, so effective was my simple acquaintance's single slap. Yes, good stranger, for a long time I shall have to remember you every time I move my jaw."

The young man had been looking at the Assistant Collector with a searching frown during this time, and now as the Assistant Collector smiled naturally at the lady, bowed deeply to him and said, "No, I can't be mistaken. It is you, lord. It is you; isn't it? I failed to recognise you at first because of this unfamiliar garb, but your stance reminded me of someone, and then your smile made me certain. Lord, forgive me for my insolence and forgive my lady here, too. Neither of us *knew you.*" "*Come, come, there is naught to forgive,*" said the Assistant Collector. "The lady has already forgiven me, so I am at peace there. Now you too must forgive me for not appearing as myself, and do me just one favour, not a word of this appearance of mine to any one. Let it be a secret between us." "Certainly, lord, I swear," said the young man. "Now, if somebody doesn't exp'ain this to me very, very quickly," explained the young lady, "I shall go dangerously mad, and when that state comes upon me, as you both have reason to know, I can do anything. Here is this small peasant type, walking along quietly with a map which perhaps he has just learnt to read, and hey, presto, you, Oh proudest of men, bend down before him and call him lord, and he looks me full in the eye and smiles graciously at me as if he indeed owned the province. Explain, explain, explain."

"Lady," said the Assistant Collector, "I regret you have been puzzled. I am indeed a servant, but no man is my master. I serve the Laws, and in the service of the Laws, all good men, this and many another, work with me and not against me. I serve the Laws by protecting the Laws and all the people under them entrusted to my care. I am your servant and his servant and the servant of your maid-servants and your man-servants to the extent that you all obey the Laws and do no wrong to anyone. I am the servant of the wrong-doer too, for I try to stop him doing wrong and aim to improve him." "Then," said the lady, wide-eyed, "you are our Hakim, the

brave, the gay of heart, the just, the generous, the fierce, the frightening, he of whom I have heard such wondrous tales from the bards. My service, lord; that slap I shall always esteem a high favour." "The good God be your protector, noble lady," said the Assistant Collector. "Do not rate me too high. I am liable to error and folly like any other man and fall into them not unoften. But I take my duty seriously and by God's grace, am humbly allowed generally to fulfil it. That is all. Which reminds me, young Sir, do you think to my many avocations has been added that of being the guardian of your valuable manuscripts? I believe it was three weeks ago that you left one, in enchanting Nastaliq script, with me, wanting to know what I thought of it, and promising to call for it next day. And I have been carrying it around from camp to camp all these days, looking carefully after each move to see that it is there and is in good order. Now explain that. Why all this delay? Why didn't you come for it next day as arranged?" The young man gazed around him unhappily *and seemed to be striving to speak while the Assistant Collector* looked at him steadily. When the pause was becoming uncomfortable, the lady said, "If I may be permitted, Sir, may I urge that you honour us with your company upto the glade and condescend to break a crust with us, so that I and my friend here can explain to you our situation while you sit in comfort." "Well," said the Assistant Collector smiling, "so be it. Your kind offer of hospitality I gladly accept. May his explanations be such as to be equally acceptable!"

## II

As the three moved forward, the lady leading, the Assistant Collector stopped, and going back a little, picked up the birds, and after some searching, the lady's shining dagger. Rejoining the pair, he held out both, "Your game, lady, and your weapon." Blushing, the lady took them, handing the ducks over to her companion and sliding the dagger with a practised hand into her belt. "Your blade

display was most remarkable," said the Assistant Collector. "If it be not too much trouble, perhaps you will not mind enlightening me as to the origin of your skill. This is not a usual weapon of our countryside, is it?" "No, lord," said the lady as they walked on, "it is a rare practice here. I owe it in fact to my gipsy blood. You didn't know of that strain in my family, did you, but it has been there for nearly a century and even today the Roumi folk are free of our land, can camp at ease upon it, take the odd hare or partridge without anyone making any fuss, nay, drop in at my father's kot at mealtimes and always be served. Not that they are ever exigent. They have too meticulous a sense of their own dignity."

"How came the first confluence?" said the Assistant Collector. "Well," said the lady, "we have a mile to walk to the glade, and the tale will beguile the distance. My grandfather's father, you must know, lord, was about the wildest young man of his time. The tales of his cruelty before he was even eighteen are matched only by the tales of his valour His father had arranged a marriage for him with the first daughter of a great house of the south. The bride was said to be extremely refined, sophisticated and delicate. So, on the way to the wedding, he detoured into enemy country, and when he rejoined the procession led by his father, carried a special sack before him. At the mutual presentation, which as you know takes place at noon before the ceremony at night, when the bride smiled, seeing so handsome and debonair a groom before her, 'Bride-to-be,' he cried, 'I bring you a special gift. See,' and flinging open the sack set out in a row at her feet, four most horrible, grisly heads, each cleanly severed at the neck. The bride gave a heart-rending shriek, then fell like a stone from her seat to the floor. My great-grandfather looked down at her and roared with laughter. 'She likes not your lovely fruit, beloved,' he cried, patting the head of the favourite axe he had been leaning on. Then sweeping Dilbar, as it was named, around him, he executed a double flourish with it above his head and shouted, 'Keep your milk-&-water girl, master of the south. I am on my way, unless any bar me. Come, come forward, champions, wedding-feast there will be none but you can still feast with death.'

With a deep growl, the southern men, all festively clad, reached for their weapons, but before any could advance, the groom's father,

who had been struck dumb by this most outrageous behaviour, rushed forward, shouting 'You will fight, will you, dastardly whelp, those who have received you in amity. Nay, first fight me, your father, me, who taught you to use your weapons, me, whom you have disgraced irreparably this day, me, who discards you from sonship now and for ever. Come, fight!' Axes at the ready, the son and father looked fiercely at one another a long while, they say. Then the son's eyes fell. 'I will not fight you, father-no-more,' he cried, 'but I will take your place when the time comes. No one else will be able to hold it, remember,' and he leapt to a side-door crowded with women, and pushing them aside, won his way into the open.

Hot was the pursuit after him throughout the afternoon and evening. A hundred times, they almost caught him; yet his courage, stamina, guile and judgment kept him free. Once, when there seemed no further hope, he stirred up, it is said, an enormous serpent, and racing up a tree, just avoiding the dart of its head, left his hunters face to face with the reptile. Night came, yet to the sounding horns of his enemies there was no surcease. From all round, it seemed, they were gathering for the kill. His clothes in tatters, his beard full of thorns, his head bare, his strength almost gone, at last he fell panting beside some bushes. The end was very near, he felt, and worse than all, he could not die fighting. All his strength seemed to have vanished. Dilbar itself he could not raise any longer. Perhaps they would capture him and then would come torture to pay several-fold over for the gross insult he had inflicted on them. Thus thinking, he crawled deeper into the bushes, then suddenly forgot all his woes, himself, everything, just gazing at the vision before him, for in the deep pool of a gently-flowing stream he saw by the moonlight d sporting herself in utter unconcern the fairest of the houris of Paradise. The intensity of his gaze must have affected her, for looking up, she saw him in his total wretchedness. Glancing all round, she gestured to him 'Here,' and as he fell into the water, pulled him into the pool and murmured, 'Down and hold your breath. Drown if you must but make no sign.' As the pursuers burst upon the scene, she was playing with her hair and singing a strange song, only her head and arms above the water. 'What do you there, woman, out,' cried their astounded leader. 'Look not upon me long, chief,' she said, 'or no woman will ever look upon you. Go your way and take your men

with you. Approach me and know this for certain, none of you will ever be able to approach any woman again. Guess you not who I am ? Know you not what night it is ? Stand you against the wise woman, the wolf woman, the Snake Woman, the Witch of Witches ? The curses fill my mouth; away, ere they burst forth ! ' Horror-struck, the group fled. Slowly the woman let her hand into the water and catching my great grandfather's hair, pulled up his head, tilting it back so that just his nostrils could be above water. Deeply he breathed and as his reeling senses came back to him, heard her say, ' Now, whether you be scum or gold, I have saved your life, and so must see you to safety. There is plenty of black mud at the bottom. Make yourself as dark as hell with it. Then do as I say. ' While he did this, she tore a couple of thick lai branches from an overhanging bush, and when he had done, made him bend low, and putting them around and over him said, ' Now creep on for a hundred yards by this bank. I shall walk alongside on it and soon we shall be at my place. Then you will be able to leave the water. ' So the lai branches crept along cautiously up the stream, in line with the woman, who stepping out on the bank had covered her wet body with a rough black robe.

It was an ordinary gipsy encampment that my dark-as death, mud-covered great-grandfather saw as he stepped out of the water. Instantly two men seized him and bore him into a low tent, where on her knees before a brazier, the woman who had rescued him was heating an aromatic-smelling mixture. Before he could look around or say a word, the mixture was at his lips; his nostrils were tightly compressed by the woman and the mixture poured down his throat. When next he came to himself, he was in a new land, clad in gipsy clothes, his beard gone, his moustaches limited to the line of his lips, at his waist a dagger belt that held no dagger, his head tied up in a red and gold scarf. When he spoke the two men who were watching him smiled good-humouredly but shook their heads; when he tried to walk about the camp, they walked with him; finally they took him to an old woman, who gave him a savoury mess in a large bowl and five parathas. Heartily he ate up everything, whereupon she smiled, patted him on the shoulder, and gave him a wondrous-tasting, fragrant drink in an old blue jug that quite reconciled him to sitting and smiling and gazing tranquilly at the surrounding mountains for the rest of the day.

The evening was drawing in, when he felt he was no longer alone and looking around, found seated at his right the woman he had dreamt and thought about continuously. You have heard the old song.

The purest moment of my life
The greatest movement of my heart.

Yes? My great-grandfather composed it many, many years later. The moment it commemorated was this one, when this woman to whom he had never spoken, whom he knew not at all, he found seated by his side, watching him gravely and dispassionately. My great-grandfather, the proudest of proud chiefs, who never bent his head, much less his knee, to anyone, however great, says

'I found myself upon my knees
My head upon her feet.
Heaven opened when she raised my head
And looked into my eyes.
No other Heaven has there been,
No other Heaven can there be
More heavenly than that.'

The two set there talking long after the stars had come out, for a time she only questioning, he answering. Who he was, what he was, what he had done, his crimes, his vices, his nature, his strength, his weaknesses, to her he revealed himself unhesitatingly, seeing himself for the first time, perhaps as he really was. She listened, then said, 'You are a great noble, the eldest son of a great noble. You must go back to your family, your people. All will be forgiven you, if you set about it rightly. I will tell you how to proceed, if you like. You must marry a sweet lady of high descent and firm courage, bring up worthy children, leave a name people will not forget for a thousand years. Come now, it grows late. Tomorrow we shall consult my father, who is our chief here, and make plans for you.'

'God in Heaven,' said my great-grandfather, whose temper was at least as quick to rise as that of this unworthy scion of his, 'if

this is how you feel and talk, why did you save me from those ravening wolves at all, lady? Far worthier would it have been to let them take me, kill me at once or torture me to death. For me, listen attentively, oh possessor of every virtue, everything was settled the moment you drew me into the pool by your side; a joyous madness seized my soul when you stood on the bank for a moment before you assumed your robe, and a grave determination to be by your side always on earth, and in Paradise or Hell, wherever our deeds lead us. This then I say, My Lady, let me be your servant for ever; marry me. I think you are not married, but if you are, God forgive me, that shall be no bar, for as soon as I see your husband, you will be a widow.' 'Talk not wildly,' said the woman, 'having saved your life, I would not send you so quickly to your end. Yes, I have a husband. Know you who he is? Death, just plain, simple Death. Can you kill Death then to make me Death's widow and marry me?' For the first time since that morning in the Southern hall, my great-grandfather stood and laughed and laughed and laughed. His mirth flowed on and on, until quite out of patience, his companion smote him heartily on the cheek, not once or twice but thrice. Then, still chuckling to himself, he caught hold of both her hands and said, 'Oh, I am so happy, so very happy you have made me. Thank you, bestower of salvation, for accepting my sin-laden and unworthy hand. What you said means that, doesn't it? If it were not for the feared intervention of Death you would marry me. Tell me I am right.' 'You are,' said the lady, 'though what it will profit you I do not know. Of all the men that I have seen uptill now, you certainly please me best. There is also a most unusual accord of minds between us. Yet consider, friend, four times have I been engaged to be married since I was fourteen, and on each occasion as the marriage-day came near, Death smote the groom. Will you make a fifth? Ah, no, not that.' 'Most lustrous of diamonds,' said my great-grandfather, 'love shall cheat Death this time. There will be no wedding-day. We shall get married just now, be wife and man before the moon rises to-night. Come, you have a ceremony, haven't you? Your father performs it? Good. Let us go to him at once.' Looking long at my great-grandfather, his beloved smiled at last, then took his hand gravely and let him to the highest tent in the encampment. To a richly-dressed man of about fifty there she spoke in her own tongue. He called in two or three other elders. They all looked curiously and

pityingly at the bridegroom to be, then shrugged their shoulders, and bowed to the couple. The simple ceremony with its pomegranate split into four, a gold piece in each (supplied by the bride, for the groom had nothing at all), the seven steps round the fire, the joinder of hands around, and lips above, the fire, was soon done. Then while the camp settled down seriously to the gay business of drinking, dancing and singing to celebrate the wedding, my great-grandfather carried my great-grandmother into her tent. In the direct line of that union am I. And all of us who have been since then. I alone bear her illustrious, though never-used-hitherto, name. Thus comes the gipsy strain in our blood. Thus, too, the skill with the dagger, for my great-grandmother's prowess with both knife and dagger, many indeed are the tales related. She would not have missed you this morning, lord."

"I must be very grateful, then, to the Most High that I had to deal with the great-granddaughter and not her," said the Assistant Collector. "But, 'tis a most fascinating narration. I must compliment you upon your skill in this difficult art. Will you not complete the history? When did the marvellous couple come back to these parts? How did they become accepted here? We have left them a gipsy pair in a distant land, the wife having very little, the husband nothing." And to the young man "Would you not also be interested in the second part?" "Most certainly, lord, I long to hear it, more especially as my lady makes her ancestors live through her words. Even so stolid and agricultural a mind as mine catches fire, and almost I see instead of her a taller, graver but equally gracious and lovely demoiselle, her black hair with a slight shading towards deep red, her green eyes, nay not green but violet, nay gray, I cannot describe them exactly." "God in Heaven, what magic is this?" gasped the astounded lady. "Truly thus is she described in an ancient song which only our oldest bard knows and which he will only sing to a very special family audience of women. You can never have heard it, and you surely haven't the imagination to make this up or I do not know you at all." "I have heard no song, but I can see the lady," said the young soldier. "Look, there she is, next to you. Pearls she wears around her neck and on her wrists are bracelets of pearls interspersed with dark-blue sapphires. And she is smiling at me and bends her head slightly. God, how stately her walk! There, now

she is gone." And he turned a dazed look upon his beloved and the Assistant Collector, who had been closely watching him.

For a long space silence held all three, while through the Assistant Collector's mind passed the two most ancient prayers of his faith, prayers he had known all his life, together with the old battle-cry of his ancestors when hardpressed. Then he said, "Come, friends, there is naught to be disturbed about in this. The great one of the past smiled at him, she did not frown, she did not weep, she did not warn. Be happy, children—that was her message, if indeed there was a message at all and she did appear. We do not really know about these things, and it is best too, for us not to trouble our finite minds too much about them. Do your duty, tell the truth, fight the good fight, what need has man that is born of woman, man that moves towards death every moment he lives, of more ? Come, smile at me, lady; smile too, at that bewildered friend of yours; let him find reassurance of life and ordinary humanness in your eyes." Released as it were from a trance, the lady drew a deep breath and smiled at them, then said, "We're at the glade, anyhow, so now I suggest we breakfast first and then if you still feel you would like to hear further about my great-grandparents, I shall go on, lord. As to what you were pleased to term my skill in narration, I am but following, though in brief, the versions of the bards. The last time a good one told the story of these two, it took him twelve evening sessions of three hours each." "Most appropriate is your suggestion," said the Assistant Collector, and following the lady, as she slipped behind a huge tree, the three soon found themselves in a very pleasant, flower-bedecked meadow where on a flat stone stood a well-loaded basket.

## III

Taking from the top of the basket a finely-woven reed mat the lady spread it on the grass, while her young friend busied himself lighting a fire a little distance away and warming upon it the milk she gave him. Soon all three were seated upon the mat cross-legged, sipping hot milk, to which had been added a special flavouring the secret of which the lady declared was known to only a very few, with a cane platter of venison strips, and another of small raisin cakes in front of them. The men fell to heartily, but the lady after a brave attempt at a cake gave up. Smiling ruefully she said, "Only the milk for me, as I feared. This talking might I thought have done the jaw some good, but chewing is still beyond me, I'm afraid. No, don't look sad, lord. The milk is strengthening enough and it will do me no harm to miss a few meals. Fasting gives zest to the soul, the saint-poet says, and who should know better than he whom enemies kept without food for 21 days to make him declare guiltless the brigand-chief who had carried off in a brutal raid a peasant's beautiful wife, and whom he had cursed solemnly in public. You know that story, lord?" "Truly a wonderful account of supreme courage and great magnanimity," said the Assistant Collector. "You remember that lovely stanza that begins" and he chanted with the proper intonation and beat,

"Those who die before they die,
Even Death fears them, friends,
*For ever they live, the world at their back*
In glory and peace fulfilled."

"Shahbash!" cried his listeners and the lady added, "I would not have thought anyone who in childhood had not drunk from our

great river could have put such deep feeling into that simple verse. You, too, I am sure, lord, would starve to death rather than give victory to the evil." "Who can truthfully tell beforehand what he or she will do when the time of testing comes?" said the Assistant Collector thoughtfully. "Pray God, may such a one not come to any of us! But his greatness the Sun will not tarry for our philosophical thoughts, and I must step into my tent before the petitioners gather so that my disguise remains unpierced. To your history, lady, the further doings of your great-grandparents, with whom be peace and joy for ever."

"It is related," said the lady, "that when next morning a shaft of sun-light falling on his face awakened from a profound sleep the new husband, the first thing his eyes fell on was a formidable axe, lying where his wife had laid beside him. His heart contracting, he looked at it carefully, then jumped up and seizing it began patting his head, murmuring 'Dilbar, my Dilbar, oh my superb Dilbar!' 'So,' his wife's clear voice cut across his thoughts 'shall I say Woe is me, I am already forgotten? Yesterday I was his toy and he lavished love upon me; today he has another.' 'God forgive you for talking thus, beloved!' cried the husband, all contrition. 'You know very well a man like me loves his wife all the more because he also loves his favourite weapon. Why, you must know that, for how did the axe come here? It surely did not walk in. No, you got it for me, you gave it back to me. More than ever am I your worshipper, dear saint. I touch your feet, I embrace your knees.' And he suited his actions to his words. Smiling tenderly she took his head in her hands, and shaking it gently said, 'Come, this is no time for transports. Today my father and the camp move on and you must decide what we should do. Let's go and sit in the open near that tree. I have got together some bread and meat and milk and for flavour there's some honey-liquor too. Let us eat and drink and think.' 'Yes,' said he, 'let us eat and drink and I shall look and look and look at you, not that you are not already deeply impressed on my heart and mind, but that it delights me utterly to keep on gazing on you. I—' 'This will not do,' cut in my great-grandmother sternly. 'There is a time for everything. I love you, this morning I think I can truly say I adore you, you are my Sun in all his glory, yet I tell you there are decisions to be made and you have to make them. Clear thinking is needed for them and clear thinking does not come from an agitated

mind, soft with emotion. Adolescence is behind you, friend. Now you are a man, much more a man than when in a fight you smote off four men's heads and carried them away. You have responsibilities, I not least of them. So, steadily, even sedately, consider your position. I am here to help you, if you want me to help, in any case to obey and serve you, but it is yours to lead. I have done, here ends my first serious talk to my husband. Now beat me if you like or even let Dilbar do its best with my neck!' My great-grandfather swept his wife into his long strong arms and carrying her like a babe, set her down at the spot she had mentioned. Then looking down at her from all his height, he said, 'Some nonsense in the midst of a great deal of good sense, my dear. Do you really think it would be necessary for me to wield Dilbar to get rid of you? One blow with the edge of my hand at the right spot on the back or side of your neck would suffice. But I don't propose to make myself a widower yet. Marriage, as you no doubt know, is a wonderful and serious condition, so where are all the good things you were proposing to dispense?' At which, they looked at one another wonder-struck for a moment, and then burst out laughing until the tears rolled down their cheeks.

However, after the food was eaten, the decisions were taken with enough seriousness and reason to please even my exacting great-grandmother. 'Let us begin with the fixed points of our case,' said my great-grandfather. 'We are here, sound in mind and body, you and I. I have you and you have me. I have nothing except you and Dilbar, whom you gave me. You have me, therefore Dilbar, and a few material things. We can go back, stay, go forward. To go back would mean to fight my father. That I will not do. Not because he is my father. No. That would be poor ground for not seizing my own inheritance. But because he is the most gay and gallant of men, because he taught me to laugh in the face of danger, because he drove fear from my heart, because he kills happily and forgives readily, because he loved my mother whom I loved dearly. He was always glad and proud to be with her, yes even when the dread disease from which she died had reduced her frame to skin and bones. When she departed to Paradise he and I stood and looked at one another as if the world had ended. Then he drew me into his arms and for the only time in our lives, we wept unashamedly in one another's presence,

These are memories that live, one does not go against them for wealth and comfort and power. Do you agree, lady?' 'Worthily and well have you decided, my lord,' said his wife. 'If one question be permitted, you said he forgives readily. Were pardon properly sought, would he not..?' 'No, I thought of that too, but consider how gross the insult to him has been. It had not occurred to me when I acted as I did. Perhaps if it had, I might have done otherwise, though wedded to Miss Fashionable I would never have been. No, he couldn't possibly overlook this. His code would not allow him. So, while he lives—may that be long—my dear land is barred to us. Do you agree?' His wife signified assent with an emphatic nod.

'Now, as to the other two points, you are likely to be a far better judge than I, my dear, for you know much more about the facts and conditions than I do. Unreservedly therefore I put myself at your disposal. You must decide what we do, you must suggest how I can earn a living. I can fight with and without weapons, look after horses, sing, and gamble with the best. I can deliver orations full of jargon in my own tongue and in another, well enough to make people believe I am truly a learned divine. This is my stock-in-trade. Tell me how to employ it.' Smiling all over her face, my great-grandmother said, 'Blessed indeed am I among women, for I have a husband who not only has a bountiful sense of humour but can even laugh at himself! All your talents are eminently suitable, Sir, and we shall certainly use them to our advantage. I have no doubt that in a short while, we shall live well, and God willing, may even become affluent by the time it is necessary to turn back to claim your inheritance. Immediately, subject to your will, I suggest we go with the camp beyond the dark mountains. My father needs a guard badly to help to keep the bandits on the way from harming us and when he sees your Dilbar and some of the feats you can do with it, he will be only too happy to enrol you on a share basis. You know he is carrying precious stones to some merchants in the capitals he proposed to visit. The jewellers here entrust them to him, because he is a man of his word, harsh and cruel but generally just, and they can rely on him wholly. With your ear for sounds, you will soon learn our language. I hope you do not object to our costume, for the time being at least?' 'Be it as you say, wisest of

wives,' cried my great-grandfather. 'If I do not speak your language well in a month, I shall quit speaking altogether and talk only by signs, for who could learn a language under better auspices? With you as companion-instructress, I shall even be able to offer to teach it for a commission in six months. And now, is the Council over, Hon'ble President? May I have the honour of escorting you to that sparkling stream I see from here and enjoy the unique privilege of bathing in it with you?' Laughing, she got up, and from that day onward the respect of these two lovers for one another grew, as their love did, with the years.

To the land of the North they went, suffering indescribable hardships in the mountain. At the capital, they parted with the caravan, settling down in a little house on the outskirts, for wandering about always in very small tents did not suit even my very uncivilised ancestor. Following the custom of the place, my great-grandmother put on a veil, and never appeared in public without it. Always when she went out, she made herself look about fifty and walked like a waddling old woman. Soon she became known for her fortune-telling and for the herbal remedies she prescribed, and began to have quite a nice little practice. Her husband meanwhile bought, sold and physicked horses, attended the lectures at the local schools of law and divinity, was always ready to take part in a game of chance, and since he could detect cheats almost on sight, and was a skilful player, won quite respectable amounts. A year they spent there, becoming, my great-grandfather is supposed to have said with a sigh, almost respectable, why he hadn't killed a man for months, when an incident happened that caused them to flee precipitately.

Among my great-grandmother's skills was midwifery. On difficult occasions of that nature she was a rock of strength. One such engagement resulted in a very urgent call in the middle of the night so that she had no time to make herself look plain and dowdy in her usual fashion. At first glance she saw it was going to be a very serious affair and got to work, calling for boiling water to be brought in. The water didn't come, though she called again and again; finally opening the door she shouted angrily, 'Is there no service in this house at all? Your mistress lies very ill and you will not even bring the hot water I need. Wretches, hurry or by the greatness of God

Himself, I shall slit all your lazy necks.' The water came quickly after that, but in her anxiety for her patient she did not notice that the door of the room had remained open and that a man stood outside all the time watching her intently. When after an arduous couple of hours, the child was born, she found the woman assisting her had disappeared and there was no one to hand it to while she ministered to the mother. 'May God deal with all you lazy backguards as you deserve,' she cried in a rage, 'hey you whom I hear skulking outside the passage come in here at once, don't waste any more time, fool.' The master came in, and almost without looking, she said, 'Hold the child. No, not like that, idiot. Have you never held a child before?' Then looking at him 'Good God, it's a man. Well never mind, you'll have to do friend. Now that's better. Keep his head up while I look after the mother. She mustn't die now that her son has come into the world.' A half-hour went by while she did all that was necessary for the mother. Then, looking up with a sigh of relief, 'I think she'll do now, if somebody will take care of her. Here give me that boy. Who are you anyway?' 'Only the master of the house, lady,' said the man. 'Then let me tell you, you run your house very badly. Where's the nurse, where are the other attendants? What does all this mean? Go on tell me.' 'Well they all thought she was bewitched and so they wouldn't go near her. I was afraid too but I am not now.' 'Let me tell you, sir fool, that you are a total ignoramus. The poor woman was just extra sensitive. Treat her well and she will soon be normal. Get the servants now and let me talk to them.' This she did so effectively, that when handsomely rewarded she left, all was in order again and the patient was being looked after properly.

A month later, her patient, now fully recovered, came to call upon her and after much hemming and hawing said that her husband, the Prime Minister's favourite nephew, was greatly impressed by the beauty and efficiency he had seen in action and would like her to be his second wife. 'Absurd,' cried my great-grandmother, 'I've a very good husband and I love him.' 'Well, that doesn't matter,' said the lady. 'My husband will manage all that. He's the Prime Minister's nephew, isn't he? Just say yes and he'll look after you for ever.' 'God give me patience,' was the reply. 'If I hear one more word about this, I'll take the stick to you. Go home now.' 'I'm

going but don't think this is the end of the matter. It is only the beginning. Why not be sensible?' Twice again, through intermediaries, handsome presents were offered in an attempt to persuade her and she had just got to the point of being about to tell my great-grandfather all about it—she had kept silence to prevent him from getting embroiled in a fight in which he must lose his life—when the storm burst.

At four o'clock one afternoon, my great-grandmother, alone in the house, was preparing in the kitchen a meal for her husband who was expected back at five, when a voice said, 'Lady, we've come for you. Follow us quietly and all will be well. Otherwise we are to bind you and carry you away. No, don't look around, four of us are in the house and there are others in the street.' 'But this cannot be. Is there no law, no justice? I shall scream and the neighbours will rush in to help.' 'Against the Prime Minister's nephew? Are you daft? You shouldn't have let him fall in love with you. Now you had better come. Your husband is probably already killed, so you've nothing to reproach yourself about. Be wise. Watching the man intently, her fingers closed on the kitchen-knife she had been cutting meat with. When he was three paces away, she jumped at him and with the knife in his throat he fell to the ground. Quickly she whipped the knife out, then seizing the pot in which the soup had just begun to boil, flung it at the three who were moving in on her. One it caught in the face and put out of action. As he groaned, the knife, flung this time, caught another in the throat. A tremendous kick in the groin disposed of the fourth just as he was about to lay hands upon her, and latching the door behind her she dashed out into the courtyard. The bard says :

In her mind was no doubt
Her husband was dead
But love once given, is given forever.

So deciding to sell her life dearly, she changed into man's clothes and girt herself with her gypsy belt with its dozen knives just as the outer door crashed open and her husband, his clothes and axe covered with blood rushed in crying 'water, water'. Quickly

she gave him water, then ran her hands over his body to assure herself he was not wounded and smiling said, 'My lord comes in good time. Now we can die together.' 'Die? you and I? No, live. But why this? They set upon me, 5 of them, in the open ground 50 yards away. Now 5 corpses lie there. But why?' 'Because of me, lord, the Prime Minister's nephew wants me, so this.' My great-grandfather got up, took his wife by the shoulders, looked deep into her eyes, then nodded and going down on one knee, kissed her hand saying, 'We shall still prevail. Let's saddle the horses in the stable and make a dash for it.' Just then, however, the tramp of armed men came up the street. 'Here,' he said, 'I'll hold the door. That's the best place for defence.' 'And I'll guard your back,' she said.

Thus when the platoon came up and called on him to surrender, his answer was just a shake of Dilbar. Three rushed to the attack, their heads he severed neatly from their trunks as if in a training school. Three more followed and met the same fate. There came a pause. Then a shout from behind him, as men jumped into the courtyard from the roof, and simultaneously a rush from in front. He felt the reassuring pressure of his wife's body against his back and his mind at ease, dealt with those in front coolly, almost mechanically, mowing them down. Meanwhile eight of the ten who had landed in the courtyard, she had harvested, each with a knife in his throat and the other two had climbed in fright on to the roof again and were out of sight. 'All goes well, dear lord,' she said, 'no foes in sight here.' 'Now is the time then. Mount the gray Arab and ride up at speed. I shall swing myself up behind you. They don't seem to like dying in front too, so the pressure has slackened.' Quickly the lady disappeared and in a few minutes with a clatter and rush was at the door. Easily her husband swung himself up behind her and they charged through the soldiers in front with hardly a check. On one side further up the street stood a group of officers. With his heels my great-grandfather directed his charger towards them and as they looked up startled, with a blood-curdling ah, ha, ha, ah, swept off the hand of the Prime Minister's nephew. Galloping on out of the town, they slackened speed a little on reaching the neighbouring hills. Suddenly, the lady said, 'God be praised, we are saved. Do you not see that gypsy encampment

there. They will shelter us, though I am afraid we shall have to part with most of the jewels I have managed to bring away !' My great-grandfather looked up in wonderment for a moment at the sky, and then laughed and laughed and when she pettishly asked what he was laughing at when he had just been ruined and was a hunted fugitive, answered, 'Why, my dear, at you and me and the jewels and the Prime Minister's nephew's flying head and the whole joke of this oh so-amusing world. God bless you, laugh too,' and she did, so that when they reached the gypsy camp, both were weak with laughter and looked so cheerful that the chief thought they had been at a drinking party and offered them a place to rest in before they started discussing serious business.

## IV

On my great-grandmother's mentioning her father's name and my great-grandfather explaining (to the Chief of the encampment in his own tongue their predicament, he forthwith laid out a worn, tattered jacket and a pair of breeches for him and urged my great-grandmother to get rid of his beard without delay. 'And you yourself look too much a house-living lady for us, no doubt you will also improve your appearance in the next half-an-hour. Meanwhile I will see to your horse.' My great-grandfather who like most young nobles paid great attention to, and was very proud of his beard, made such sad faces as his wife first shortened it and hen soaping it, made his face bare, that she was moved to loud laughter and said, 'Come now, great warrior, cease being doleful. Neither your strength nor your attraction lies in your beard. See, I love you still and have no doubt Dilbar will be wielded even better by my beardless champion.' 'Cease prating,' said her husband, ', tis twice now I have been rid of this adornment of manhood. How think you will I take my place among my peers in my own land with a stunted beard ? ' Chuckling his wife assured him

that if when the time came to regain his heritage his beard was not stately enough, she would use special unguents to strengthen it and might even recite a charm or two over it. My great-grandfather sat silent, then while his wife was darkening her arms and feet, tinting and creasing her face, and changing into an old gipsy skirt and shirt that had been thrust into the low tent where they were, he said, 'Listen, I have a song.' It was a song my great-grandmother made famous in a far off place, as you shall hear later. It is a song still heard with us when young men go a-wooing. You know it, lord? The first line goes "The tyrant who captured my heart has stolen my beard." Whereupon the Assistant Collector continued in a strong voice.

'Hussy, oh, the hussy, oh,

She's stolen my beard who ravished my heart.'

and all three went on roundly with the next four lines of the stanza, each with the refrain, clapping their hands most vigorously with the final 'Hussy, oh, the hussy, oh!' and bursting out laughing. "If I may be forgiven, lord, permit me to remark that you seem to have neglected no part of our culture," said the lady with a meaningful smile. "Did not the saint-poet say, He that would keep the people right, must know them well, very, very well. Does the answer suffice, lady?" "It will serve, though I would dearly love to know the circumstances in which your greatness acquired this song." "'Tis your tale we hearken to, lady. Our ears are on fire for your gracious ancestors' deeds. Continue, pray continue. Much ground has, I am sure, still to be traversed," said the Assistant Collector.

"Your pleasure, lord. As my great-grandfather's song ended, the Roumi leader came into the tent and inspecting the couple, nodded approvingly. 'Your noble horse, alas, we cannot keep,' he said. 'How could we account for having such a steed? I cannot even attempt to sell him, so he will be abandoned in the foothills ten miles in the other direction. There's plenty of fodder there, he will not starve, and whoever finds him will bless his star. For the rest, you can come with us, if you can appear both surly and humble. That mighty axe, of course, you will dismantle and hide. And now, since you are your father's daughter, do not tell me you

have come away empty-handed. We make you in your former guise disappear and protect you in your present guise. You, no doubt, have something to sweeten the contract.' 'Truly, chief, I have not much,' said my great-grandmother, 'but such as it is, it is for your sight,' and she drew forth a very small handembroidered silk bag, and let fall from it on the mat six flawless stones, a pair each of diamonds, rubies and emeralds. 'Not much, she says, not much,' exclaimed the chief. 'By Sigita and all his demons, each pair of these is a prince's ransom. Not for nothing are you known among us as The Wise Woman. My eyes grow big as I look at them, and my avarice pants to own them all. But you being you, give me what you will, and keep the rest. Fear not for these or yourselves, your man and you are safe with us.' My great-grandmother looked at her husband, who too seemed amazed at the flow of the stones and said, 'Will you decide, Sir?' 'I,' said he, 'and what pray do I know of precious stones? Still, I have it. The two diamonds and this emerald for you, my dear, and the rubies and the other emerald for our worthy host. Does that find favour with your excellencies?' and he made a most courtly bow first to his wife and then to his chief. 'God in Heaven,' cried the chief, 'You give me three. Why, one would have been enough, two ample. Are you sure, daughter, I would not rob you,' and on her nodding smilingly and holding out the two rubies and emerald to him ''tis your mother's side of the family you must favour, for I would never have believed it of your father's daughter.' 'Good luck to you with these,' said my great-grandmother and the chief replied, 'And fortune stay with you in ample measure, sister and brother. Tomorrow by eight we leave. So now eat the meal I send you and sleep well, but not too well. And I need not tell you this, but let no one get even a glimpse of those stones ever while you're with us. My renewed thanks.'

"As he strode out, my great-grandmother said to her husband, 'Why the diamonds and the emerald, lord?' 'Because, lady, they are you. The deep steady light in the heart of the emerald is the tranquillity in your eyes when you are at rest, and the flow and fire of the diamonds are your own intensity and animation in action. The beauty of all three combined is just a symbol of your splendour.' 'Poet, poet,' said his wife, 'oh master of imagination,' and she tried to smile, but her smile turned to a sob and the tears flowed

freely from her eyes. 'Look you,' said her husband, going down on his knees beside her as she sat on the floor, 'I do not exaggerate. Is there ever a woman who would have stayed at my back and saved me as you did but a little while ago, wife?' 'And is there ever such a hero who being victorious in war and generous in peace, would have praised his wife as you did?' 'Well,' said her husband jocularly, 'clearly we are unique. Come let us celebrate this with our high-leaping, heel-slapping dance to the cry 'We are unique.' And they did, going out into the open place before their tent, until their food arrived and with it by special grace of the chief the ambro-honey-liquor that in tiny sips delights the heart, and mellows the mind.

"I think, lord, in view of the shortness of your time, I will not dwell upon their many notable adventures in the next three years, when all the time they travelled westward, changing one Rumi group for another where its territory ended, always with good will and in pleasant fellowship, until they reached the enormous city or rather cities, one on each side of a wide river, joined by a noble bridge, that had fired my great-grandfather's imagination ever since he heard of it in the plaintive song of a gipsy from the West. The night he heard it, he said to his wife, 'The place he described, it seemed to me I knew, there let us go, there I think we can rest.' And so three years and much fighting after the day they fled from the town of the North, found them in the city, having said farewell to the last of their temporary travelling companions on the outskirts. As the two, outlandishly garbed, walked through the streets gazing at the shops, a door burst open and an enormously fat short man in a fur cap rushing out, caught hold of each of them by the arm and shouting 'Rumi, Rumi' began pulling them towards the door. When my great-grandfather stood stock-still and gazed contemptuously at him, he smiled, shook his head, and taking a purse from his waist-band poured out some gold coins in his hand and offered them to him. My great-grandmother took the coins, examined them, then said to her husband, 'Come, the man seems kindly. Let us go with him. 'Tis our first adventure, Sir, in the city of your desire, and shall we turn our backs upon it?' My great-grandfather smiled, then in a thunderous voice called 'Forward' and moved on at a great pace dragging the fat man along.

"Inside the door they found a fairy-land, a tastefully decorated eating-place with every table occupied, and in the middle a stage with a woman singing upon it. Hastily drawing the pair into a room behind, the fat man thrust a colourful dress for my great-grandmother and a guitar upon them and holding up his fingers to indicate ten, dashed out. 'Ten minutes I think, he means,' said my great-grandfather 'and now we are entertainers, are we? Well, so be it.' He then twanged the guitar and played about with the pitch, while his wife changed hurriedly into the dress that emphasised greatly her magnificent long legs and splendid long arms. As she stamped her right foot in the first step of a dance they both knew well, he said, 'Beautiful you have always been, but tonight there is a queenliness in your beauty that I have not seen before. Let me be the first of your subjects to kiss your hand, Majesty.' As he bent down to take her hand, she caught him tightly to herself, and thus found them, the fat man as he came to call them, out stood, lost to time and all else beyond, in the beauty of that scene. At last, coughing, he bowed low and continuing to bow with his face toward them, moved backward till they were on the stage. He then looked at them, gazed around the audience, and flinging his fur cap high in the air, rushed off the stage.

"My great-grandfather has described, say the bards, the first note he played that night as the moment of silence. Then as his wife took the right-foot step in the dance, came the moment of wonderment. For half an hour the two made music, sang, danced, looking only at one another, thinking only of one another, and the silence held and the wonderment grew. When at last, they looked around, seeming to realise as it were for the first time that they were surrounded by people, the highly sophisticated audience applauded madly. The fat impresario at last managed to escort them back to a much finer room than the one he had first given them, and six lackeys followed them carrying the presents, many costly, the audience had flung at their feet. In language after language the impresario tried to speak to them, and some words my great-grandfather understood, but his many years of travel had made him cautious and he knew that for the fresh comer to a new society nothing is more useful than a reputation for not understanding what is said to him and around him.

Now, at last, both my great-grandparents felt their wanderings were over. They soon acquired the elements of the language, settled down in a comfortable apartment, lived well and made friends, first among the artistes with whom they worked and then with some of the patrons of the restaurant. Among its regular visitors was the Regent of the land, a huge yet graceful soldier with the strength and much of the temperament of a bear. Having one day shown a more than ardent admiration for my great-grandmother, he found her husband's gaze fixed balefully upon him. 'What, will you fight,' he roared, 'come then outside.' And on the lawn of the garden, drew forth his mighty sabre. My great-grandfather who had rushed up to his room, hurried out too, Dilbar in hand. 'Ah, ah, an axeman are you? A shield then for my left arm.' 'You can have a shield, too; offer him his choice,' the lord said. My great-grandfather shook his head in disdain, and stood alone, contemptuous of the many men of great rank and high position gathered round the Regent, urging him not to demean himself by fighting a mere entertainer. Let him be sent to prison, they said, that would tame his overweening pride. 'Have done,' said the Regent, 'look at the man and look at his poise. There is blood there, fools, no man demeans himself by fighting such a one. And I haven't dealt with an axeman since that battle with the Turks when I was eighteen. On guard, Sir, I advance.' The bards spend three-quarters of an hour on that combat, how the sabre darted like lightning, how Dilbar turned, so it seemed, into a weaving shield, parrying thrust upon thrust and stroke upon stroke, how its wielder was forced to all back until he was pent-up against the garden fence, how then with a superb leap he jumped right over the attacker, leaving him quite bewildered, and waited instead of felling him from behind, Dilbar head-down held lightly, and cried, 'Here, Sir, here I stand behind you,' how the Regent prompt to react drew first blood with a cut above the shoulder, how my great-grandfather frowned and with his blood-curdling Ah, Ha, Ha, Ah almost seemed about to sever the opponent's neck from his trunk, then changed direction and with a delicacy unparalleled carried off just the sabre and the little finger of the hand that held it. The Regent caring nothing for the blood flowing from his wound, embraced my great-grandfather, then demanded wine and calling him brother, drank heartily to his health. My great-grandmother, who had been watching the fight with sparkling eyes he toasted too, saying it was no wonder when she

had such a man for a husband, none other appealed to her. She said naught, but looked him straight in the eyes, and curtsied to him so gracefully and completely, that none present could keep his gaze from her. Rising she turned to her husband and led him away to see to his shoulder-cut.

"Thereafter life seemed to have entered a pleasant and straight course for this grand couple. They were accepted in the highest quarters, yet they did their work assiduously and continued to get high fees. They lived comfortably, had their own riding and carriage horses, went to and gave dinner and card parties, visited the estates of friends and hunted the wild bear in the border forests. Twice, feeling somewhat restless at the routine life he was leading, my great-grandfather accompanied the Regent to the war against the tribes from the East, and learned to realise how much more war meant than single combat and courage. On both occasions, he won much merit by his skill in planning and his initiative in action, but declining honours and responsibilities, returned to his wife, guitar and songs. It was after his second campaign that she caught him watching her with a puzzled countenance several times. One evening, therefore, she took him to dinner at a small country inn, some miles out of the city, and while the nightingales poured out their hearts in harmony, sat with him quietly in the garden listening. Suddenly she asked, 'Have I changed, lord, that I puzzle you? Tell me what is it that you seek in me and do not find.' After a long silence, he said, 'You are perfect, set your heart at rest. And yet I am puzzled. Is the fault in me, I think, that after so many years of settled life, we still have no children.' 'How can you think any such thing? No, I am as you know called a wise woman and one of the ways in which I am wise is that I know how to prevent conception. We have not had children because I have not wished to have them until we had won back your own heritage. Then God willing, you shall have sons and may be daughters, too, of whom we may be proud. This I promised myself when we were first married. So please do not repine. We are not too old, are we? You are now twenty-six and I twenty-three. I am sure the time will come soon for us to go back!' 'Bless you,' said my great-grandfather, 'let all be as you will.'

Strangely enough, but a few days later, my great-grandmother riding outside the city on her own to collect some herbs and roots she knew grew in a wood, came upon an old man, who looked at her, then looked away, then looked at her again. When she spoke to him in the gypsy tongue, he said, 'I thought I know you underneath all that finery. Have you still the husband you saved and married in defiance of Death?' Dismounting, she plunged into the wood carrying the basket she had brought for breakfast and urged him to sit down beside her and share her fare. He did and told her her father was well but grown more irascible than ever. Also her husband's father had died, oh, three years ago perhaps, and his lands were now in the hands of a nephew, for her husband's younger brother had been killed in battle during his father's life-time. He himself, he confessed, would never have come as far as this, had he not fallen out with his sept over a woman and had to flee far south into the hot lands where being still pursued, he had sought refuge in a ship that had landed him in Turkey over a year ago. They had made him a galley-slave when they found him stowed away but he had done some magic, taking away cockroaches from the captain's ear when he had a bad headache, so they freed him and offered him a share in the ship if he would remain. However, the wanderlust was upon him, so he had bid them good-bye and left with their blessings. My great-grandmother invited him to come and be her guest, but he refused, saying in excuse, 'You are too beautiful and who knows the evil Sigita may work in my mind.' She then asked him to meet her husband, but said he, 'No, to tell you the truth. I am engaged on a ploy in which I hope to win both girl and gold, so the fewer the people who know I am around the better.' She questioned him again and again about the happenings in her husband's land. His answers were positive, and when she pressed upon him money and ornaments he refused to accept anything. All he wanted was that she should sing the sad Song of the Maidens that had remained in his memory of her from the past. She sang it for him and the tears rolled down his cheeks. When she stopped, he bent forward and kissed her hand, saying 'Go now in Peace.' She left him the bottle of wine they had not opened and rode back to the city.

## V

"Learning the news from his home that his wife gave him after lunch that day, my great-grandfather fell into a reverie. At last he said, 'Peace be with you, father and brother. Your true heir will soon take your place. God willing. Well, my dear, our days of living for ourselves are over. Soon, in whatever we do, we shall have to think of our people, and nothing can be quite so restricting as that, I realise now, as I recollect many incidents in my father's and mother's lives. Promise me this, though, before we go further. However bored or tired you get with your manifold duties and comparatively sedate great lady life, you won't leave me. I'd rather renounce all thought of recovering my heritage and stay here, enjoying ourselves as we do now, than risk losing you. You have the worship of this whole city today. It is cruel indeed to drag you away to a rough countryside where the only things people get excited about are weather and crops and fighting. So, the choice is yours. Say the word and I'll forget that you ever told me what you heard from the gypsy this morning. I mean it. Quite honestly, I'm not sure that I too will not regret abandoning this fascinating centre of true elegance, where the air itself is impregnated with gaiety and song, courtesy and graciousness. So don't think you'll be making me unhappy if you decide we should stay.' 'And what,' said his wife very seriously 'about my promise to my unborn children that they will be born in the home of their fathers? There's nothing further to discuss. Let us prepare to leave as soon as possible.' 'I shall seek the Regent's permission, then,' said my great-grandfather equally seriously. 'I hope he comes to our performance this evening.'

"That night to a packed audience my great-grandfather sang as the last item of the programme the song in honour of the city that he had composed after his wife's conversation with him. In the middle of the last verse, his voice broke and he stood there weeping;

suddenly his wife's superb contralto took over and added an even more nostalgic tone to the fine blessing with which it ended. He rendered it in our tongue later. You may not have heard it; for it is sung but rarely now." "I think it begins

Fairer than fairest maiden
Kinder than kindest mother.

and ends

Lovelier than love itself.
Paradise of Hearts.
Blossom for ever, Dearest City.

Oh my Beloved Queen of all Cities!" sang the Assistant Collector. "Splendid, Sir, splendid" cried the young lady, "I never heard it better. On behalf of my great-grandfather, most grateful thanks. His listeners, enraptured, sat there in complete silence, their eyes misty too, until my great-grandmother took his hand, and bowing low to the audience again and again, led him off the stage, still lost as it were in a trance. So deeply did he seem affected that my great-grandmother could not get him even to wipe his face or drink the glass of wine she poured out for him.

"She was just wondering whether to throw cold water over him or slap him hard on both cheeks, when a knock sounded at the door and the Regent walked in and dropping a heavy hand on my great-grandfather's shoulder said, 'Ah, still in the clouds? No wonder, after that classic. It will be sung by little children when you and I have been dust for over a century.' My great-grandfather, aware at least of his surroundings, got up hurriedly and tried to express his gratification at this high praise from so lofty a quarter. 'No, no,' said the Regent impatiently. 'sit down, poet, and I'll sit with you, and the gracious lady will no doubt give me a glass of wine and take one herself to drink long life to your song and to you both.' And after the toast had been drunk, 'I am worried, that song was not just for nothing. Are you thinking of leaving or is something else in the air, tell me.' 'Lord Regent,' said my great-grandmother, 'thus has it happened,' and she related the whole tale, ending with 'and therefore, he and I must go back to his land, and we crave your most

gracious permission to depart.' 'Well,' said the Regent, sighing, 'as you tell it, there's nothing else you can do. So go you must. But we shall all be desolate without you two, and especially you, lady. I wonder if you realise what an influence for good you've been, so beautiful, so warm, so proud and yet so true to your entertainer husband. You've made virtue fashionable in this easy-going 'Paradise of Hearts' as the great song rightly called it. Well, friends, go, my blessings with you, and if ever you can, come back. This is always your home. And since you have to go East, you will be my guests till Constantinople, travelling down with an embassy I am sending to the Sultan. And, tomorrow at noon, I shall give you lunch at the palace. Alas, alas, one grows older suddenly when dear friends depart.' The kind-hearted bear of a man stamped away.

"As the sound of his footsteps died down, the two looked at one another for a long minute, then fell into one another's arms, weeping most piteously. 'Everything has gone so well. I don't know why we are crying,' at last said my great-grandmother. 'I know why we are crying,' said her husband. 'It is because the happy past will soon be past, because the unknown future is opening before us, because so many fine people we shall see no more, because this river, these streets, these shops are all our friends we must leave, because in brief we are human beings and so never quite know the reality of anything.' 'Wonderful,' said my great-grandmother, smiling at last, 'the embassy I was told leave next week, so our days are in any case going to be so busy settling things that there will be little time for thought, let alone sorrow or gladness.' I have never understood why they wept. Do either of you gentlemen." "No, I don't either," said the young man. "I have some inkling, perhaps" said the Assistant Collector, "from personal experience. You know when I left my first sub-division some years ago, alone in the railway compartment, I found myself sobbing broken-heartedly. Why was it, I asked myself, I was being promoted to a bigger charge, I had nothing to be sorry about. And yet sadness had overcome me. It was this. In the year and a half I had been there it had become to me a home dearer than my own home. I liked almost everyone, rich and poor, including some of the badmashes; everyone, I found, liked me. They smiled at me, they talked to me, they told me their secrets, they warned me against one another, they laughed at the mistakes I made in speaking their language and forbearingly corrected me, they often taught me my work, they appre-

ciated every effort I made to do justice, to set wrong right, even when it went against themselves, they approved of any effort for their improvement, the littlest children in a village would get vaccinated or innoculated when it became necessary, because I insisted, and I looked on and said Shabash. What a brave boy or girl you are, they gave up cutting branches from the trees of a beautiful avenue because I got angry, they fought hard bringing in lawyers, false witnesses, all manner of tricks of course when they were caught out in something criminal or horribly illegal, but many, when all was over and I visited them in jail, would still welcome me and say you did well; it was unfortunate for me, but you were right. So I wept and my pillow was wet when with the sun I woke up on the borders of the new division I was going to. Then cheerfulness reasserted itself. It was the feeling of kindness received, of 'Oh what lovely people' and the certain deprivation of their company, that made me and I think your great-grandparents weep. But I must stop talking. You two really mustn't set me going like this." "Oh, but that was wonderful," said the young lady, "it explains so much about you and your many great deeds here. Yes, yes, I know, the story of my great-grandparents. Well, next day they went to lunch at the Palace. Very magnificent it was, and my great-grandparents enjoyed it immensely. She was seated on the Regent's right and he by the side of the lady highest in degree. At the end of the banquet the Court Orator proposed the health of the couple, comparing her to a better Eve, tempted by every variety of serpent (their great city being celebrated for the richness and skill of the species), yet resisting all temptation and thus maintaining for herself and her Adam (no mean tempter himself, according to the fair sex, if he would but set his mind to it) Paradise untainted. Long was the laughter. Loud the applause later when he referred to the innocent joy their entertainment had bestowed upon the people for so many years their great friendliness and willingness to help, their ideal citizenship. Called upon to reply, both got up and together sang the Song of the City, sitting down to that complete hush that is any audience's greatest tribute. The Regent then bestowed upon my great-grandmother a rare gold and enamel necklet with scenes of the city worked upon it in colour and a pair of jewelled daggers, and on her husband a magnificent Toledo sword and an Italian guitar of a famous make. It was

five in the evening before the party rose from table and when God-speed had been said by every guest, they had hardly time to rush home and change for their act.

"Scenes of the wildest enthusiasm marked their performance that evening and for the next two nights, after which they stopped working. Their fur-capped impresario wanted to give them enough presents to fill two four-horse carriages, and when with difficulty dissuaded, insisted on presenting to my great-grandmother the pearl and saphhire necklace in which our good friend here saw her and a bag with five hundred gold florins. My great-grandfather looked so sternly at him that much to my great-grandmother's regret he scurried away without giving him the two beautiful diamond rings he had brought for him.

"Having settled all their affairs in good time, early one morning, both rode out with the embassy. The plenipotentiary, a learned and able old man, was in a carriage, and my great-grandparents rode with the senior members of the delegation on horseback. So many nobles and their ladies had however ridden out to see them off that soon the ambassador and delegation were left far behind, and when it got to the end of the first stage, discovered my great-grandparents had already had breakfast with their friends and a concert was in progress. Smiling the Ambassador made his way into the inn and sent them a message to say they had better rest, for the next stage was much longer and the road extremely bad. When three hours later they started again, they felt really alone for all their friends had now left. Forty days' monotonous travelling brought them to Constantinople. Not a raid, not an attack, not a murder, nothing said my great-grandfather in disgust, until he realised the severity of the punishment meted out from an occasional gallows set up outside a town, the severed hand or arm or foot or leg lying in the ditch by the road. Terror, stark terror, kept the peace, said the plenipotentiary and thanked God for his mercies. On reaching Constantinople, he obtained for my great-grandparents lodging at a respectable inn, and said he was at their service if they wanted him to help in any way but otherwise his responsibility towards them was over. They thanked him warmly, and sent a most grateful letter of thanks to the Regent through him. Then returning

to the inn they settled down over Turkish coffee and honey-liquor to examine the problem of their return.

"Two courses were open to them. They could become gypsies again and moving with group after group, go eastwards all the time as they had gone westwards, on the outer journey. This would take them three years or longer. They could join up with caravans going from city to city and get home much quicker, if all went well, say in a year or so. The danger, of course, was greater with the caravans, which, when well protected, were often raided in the wilder tracts. Eventually they decided on the second course and the fine lady of the City of the Bridge disappeared, her place being taken by the waddling middle-aged dame in the purdah last seen in the town of the North from which they had fled many years ago. The details of their journey back, the many desperate fights both with raiders and caravan leaders who tried to rob them, the ascendency of Dilbar over all weapons and the success of its master both as warrior and strategist, I shall pass over. Sufficient it is to say that fifteen months after leaving Constantinople, my great-grandparents found themselves at a small town 30 miles from home, with their wealth not only not depleted but almost doubled since the attack the master of the caravan had launched upon them one dark night by the side of a ravine, had been repulsed by them with so much slaughter, that only four camelmen who had hidden themselves when the fighting began remained alive when day dawned. They came in useful to tumble the corpses of the night into the ravine and were then told they could fight it out, all four against the master, or could join as servants on the wages that had been agreed on and a twenty-fifth share of the booty. They preferred the second course.

"So in the early Spring, when, as you know, everything around us looks new and refreshed, there were my great-grandparents, with four servants, horses, camels, goods of all kinds from carpets to dates, in a caravanserai 30 miles from home. The first thing my great-grandmother did was to rent a small house with a large courtyard, the second to change over from the waddling middle-aged woman to her own proper shape and dress, the third to set up a target in the yard and give herself a quick refresher course with the knives, fifteen minutes at a time, twice or thrice a day. Meanwhile, my great-grandfather got rid of a good deal of his stock at quite good

prices and in gypsy guise,—his still remaining clean-shaven helped him to continue unknown—penetrated right upto the village within his lands that lay only two miles from the great house. Here selling trifles, he soon learnt all he wanted to know. His cousin who had taken over as chief had a good reputation for courage and was respected for his general shrewdness. He was not particularly popular, but would certainly be backed by the people against an outsider. The general view about himself, the eldest son of the old master, was that he hadn't been able to escape his pursuers in the South country and had probably been drowned in one of the whirlpools the river there abounded in.

"So much had his sojourn abroad affected my great-grandfather *that he thought it would be only right to give his cousin a chance* to do the fair thing before resorting to force. He wrote therefore a courteous letter telling his cousin he had returned from foreign parts and hoping he would now resign the estate to its rightful owner. He said he was prepared to prove on any neutral ground his cousin chose his own identity and suggested they should meet unarmed at the house 15 miles distant of a respected friend of his father. This letter he induced a former nurse of his, to whom he had revealed himself and who had no doubt of his identity from certain signs on parts of his body not normally visible, to take to the house and deliver to his cousin. She said slapping him hard on the cheek she would take it not for his sake or because of the gold piece he had given her, but for the sake of his poor cousin, who was bound to be worsted if he came into conflict with the 'cruel monster that is you. No, don't look at me like that, though of course if you do, no one who has seen you even once can mistake you, oh shameless barefaced.' Two days later he had his answer. When at midnight he crept into the the nurse's hut, he heard her groaning. The letter, she said, had been torn up and thrown in her face, she had been given twelve strokes with the bastinade and a watch was being kept on her hut to capture whoever came. 'Escape, drinker of my milk,' she said, 'and do not come back until you have an army behind you, for at least 150 men are to be always ready at the hall.' Noiselessly vanishing in the dark, at 6 next morning my great-grandfather woke up his wife with a cup of sweetened milk and a hot buttered scone for a council of war.

"What could be done to avoid violence has been done, was the conclusion they reached. Now the day must be carried by force.

'They have 150, have they ?' said my great-grandmother. 'Well, you are more than a hundred and I more than 50, so we outnumber them. Let us settle this tomorrow. I am tired of this small house. There is something still troubling you, dear lord. Speak.' 'I wish I had my beard. They may with reason say they don't recognise me without it. And I have a strange reluctance to kill my own people if it can be avoided.' 'Well, then, you shall have your beard,' said my great-grandmother. 'It will take hours of work and will be painful I warn you, but it will be a good fan-shaped beard that will make you look a true landed magnate.' And hair by hair over hours she put on his beard, fixing it so firmly that he lept that night with it, and never even felt it was artificial. Next day, while the dew was still on the ground, husband and wife, camouflaged in green and brown, crept to the nurse's hut. Quietly inside, the husband roused her. Seeing his beard, she shrank back making the sign against the Evil One. 'Fear not, nurse, it's only me. You called me beardless shameful, so my beard suddenly sprouted.' 'Well devil or man, you must eat, so come into the kitchen,' said the nurse. 'Have you got your army?' 'Aye, there she is. Do you see her?' asked my great-grandfather, as my great-grandmother, in her tight man's dress, completely black, begirt with two crossbelts carrying a dozen knives each and at her waist the jewelled daggers of the regent, stepped forward. 'Oh, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful,' sighed the old nurse,' come, my pretty, you must eat to sustain your strength. Now I know why I have lived so long. I shall have to dandle your sons upon my knees.' All day, the pair lay hidden in the nurse's back room.

"At 6, when the evening meal would be over and all gathered in the hall, my great-grandfather stepped cautiously out, clad in the full white robes and high turban of the chief, and dropping over the outer wall full on the sentry below, stunned him with the back of Dilbar. His lady following, tied and gagged the man up neatly with her own turban. Waste of effort she thought, the man could have been silenced completely, but at the same time she felt a great deal of respect for this noble who was her husband and even in extremity followed the dictates of his code, to go easy with his own people. Quickly they came to a side window, and while she stood there, he jumped through on to the marble floor. Advancing to within ten feet of the dais, Dilbar in hand but not at the ready, 'Cousin, do you

recognise me now?' he cried 'and will you yield me my heritage?' 'Imposter, imposter,' cried the man on the high seat. 'Cut him down, men.' And he rose to rush down himself, axe at the ready. As armed men struck at my great-grandfather from three sides, and Dilbar swept round to clear the semi-circle, a knife whistled through the air and the cousin came tumbling down, the blade in his throat. Meanwhile my great-grandfather was trying to hold rather than kill, saying 'Fools, look at me. Do you not see my father in me? Do you not recognise me?' Some fell back and lowered their weapons but a hard core of about 35 pressed forward, and tried to encircle him. 'Kill now, kill, Dilbar' called my great-grandmother from the window. 'It is kill or be killed.' And accurately she placed her knives in the throats of those just about to strike. Meanwhile Dilbar too struck and struck again and each time a head was not only severed from the neck but cleanly swept away, the murmur arose 'It is he, this is his skill, none else can equal this.' Men at a distance dropped their weapons to the floor and some of the nearer ones fell back. Twenty of her twenty-four knives expended, my great-grandmother seized the opportunity of the slackening to rush forward with a cry that seemed to come from Hell itself and pressed herself into her husband's back. 'You have my back guarded, beloved' cried he. 'Well, then, I shall show you some play, you blind fools.' And with his awe-inspiring cry of ah, ha, ha, ah, he had at one time three heads in the air. Suddenly all opposition ceased, and in the middle of the great floor stood only the two back to back.

"With blood all over him and headless corpses in front of and alongside him, he took her hand, brought her to his side and said, 'All ye present know this lady and note with care what she says. Obey her as you would me and fear her even more than me, for she is my wife, and at times even I fear her. Clear the hall of these friends who lie around, wash the floors and bring fresh wine and food, and also bring me that huge cauldron of hot water we had, and nurse, oh nurse of my childhood, come and bathe me.' So there with the dead bodies being carried out and the severed heads being collected and floors and walls being washed free of blood and the table being relaid, in sight of all the people he flung his clothes on the floor and stark naked, stepped into the cauldron, where the nurse bathed him as if he were a boy of four, remarking on the

various marks he bore and how they had become bigger or redder with his frame and completely convincing every one that he was what he was. As he stepped out of the cauldron, his wife appeared freshly bathed and regally attired, carrying for him new white robes and a jewelled cummerband. He who had faced a whole roomful naked visibly blenched, they say, as she looked at him with a mischievous smile and said, 'Thou art indeed at home at last.' This then was the homecoming of my great-grandparents, lord. The rest of their time on earth was notable too, but nothing to compare with these early days. Two sons my great-grandmother bore her husband, the second so big that thereafter she could have no other children. Following Rodabeh she called him Rustam, and from him are we all descended, for the first son fell in battle, just before he was to be married, in a glorious battle that would have delighted his father's heart, after he single-handed had killed twenty-five of the enemy with the same Dilbar that was his father's. So impressed were his opponents that they left Dilbar at our gate one night, the head covered with white roses and tied to the handle a label, with in beautiful script 'This heroic weapon fit only for a hero's hand, with respect we return to the hero's house."

## VI

"Greatly indeed am I your debtor, lady, for this wonderful history you have so vividly recounted," said the Assistant Collector. "Would we could have spent an hour or two more on it so that you might have elucidated a few points that arise in my mind. But the day advances, and so to where we started from. You were going to tell me, young Sir, why having agreed to take back next day the manuscript you had left with me, you did not show your face at all and have compelled me to carry it around all this time." "Regrettable as is any failure to keep an engagement, lord," said the young man, "you must forgive me if I say I am not really

sorry I could not keep mine. My reason stands here in front of you. Lord, what could I do?" "He doesn't know how to explain, lord," broke in the lady, blushing, "may I speak on his behalf and mine. Thus it happened. I was shooting that morning, dressed in male costume as today, in a field a little to the west of us and was just about ready to let go at a snipe that had risen suddenly and after its usual zigzags, was now straightening to settle again, when a loud Ha disturbed my concentration and the wretched bird got away. Furious I turned round and there was this, this, oh well this, leaning on his iron-tipped staff and saying patronisingly. 'Boy, you shouldn't be shooting on my land. I see you've already got some quail and a partridge. Well, never mind, keep them. And now, off. *If I catch you here next time, I'll tan your hide well.*' 'Rustic oaf,' I cried, 'your land indeed! Why all this is ours right up to as far as you can see. Who are you to be here, anyway? Get out or'—and I put my gun to my shoulder. 'Don't be foolish, boy,' said he without even raising his voice, and quick as lightning his staff tapped the butt of the gun hard, causing me to drop my weapon. 'Now, stand,' said he, 'and we will have an accoun'ing.' My hand flew to my waist-belt for my knife. Wonder of wonders, it was not there. At once I turned and fled, thinking to myself the man's too heavy to be able to keep us, he'll be winded long before me. And so it might have been, lord, for after five furious minutes, it seemed to me he was beginning to fall behind when my foot catching in a hidden hoof-mark I stumbled. As I tried to recover, with a roar he was upon me. His left arm went round me, high right had seized my throat in front. I thought my hour had come indeed, but struggled as hard as I could. Suddenly our eyes met. I ceased struggling lord, nor can I even tell when his grip upon my wind-pipe relaxed. No more do I know of that golden day."

"We were bewitched, lord," said the young man. "I know that I found myself in this grove where we are, carrying her in my arms. All day we were together. If we talked or what we talked about I do not remember. A little before sunset, she got up, took my right hand, shook it like a man and said 'Tomorrow.' I answered "Tomorrow," and when she had gone I did *not* even *know her* name." "For a whole week it was like that, lord. The world seemed to have fallen sway from us. We met, we parted to meet again

next day, to part and meet again. My parents were from home, and as I have always been wayward and independent and have gone and come as I liked, none bothered about me," said the lady. "But my parents were to return, and so at the end of a week, the world came back to us. He learned who I was and was dismayed; I learned who he was and smiled, but a little ruefully. You see, I was the only daughter of a very powerful and rich house; he, though in lineage equal, nay even perhaps better, for his forbears were mighty a century and a half before mine, was unfortunately, not even comparatively comfortably off. When a house has the misfortune to pass into the hands of two generations of ardent gamblers, one of whom in addition is a great patron of the muslin sisterhood, well, thus it was. He told me scarce a hundred and fifty acres were left to him, and though he had laboured at them greatly and profitably, following often the precepts of one of the elders of his line, a most notable planter of groves and setter-up of orchards, he would be deceiving himself if he let himself believe my family would account him a desirable son-in-law. It was only too true, lord; my father perhaps could be persuaded, but my step-mother, no, impossible. She has always disliked me, for one thing; for another she is very proud and fancies herself as the mother-in-law of the Prince of ... She never loses an opportunity of telling me that now that I am grown-up, she is bestirring herself on my behalf in the most highly-placed quarters. I tell her I will make my own fate. She says I will do as my elders desire and gets my father's approval to her words. From their point of view, naturally they want to do the best for the family. My two brothers are from my step-mother and though they are still young, she has to think of them too.

"The real difficulty though is, as I see it, that my father likes and does not like me. My mother, his first wife, was the one love of his life. He had wooed her for two years and when he married her, life for him reached its climax. She adored him, too, and for a year-and-a-half, no one could have been happier than they. Then, in bearing me, she died. They say he was so distraught that he would not even let me be kept in the house, and an old servant of my grandfather's finding me utterly neglected, carried me off to his lonely hut, trying to feed me, very unsuccessfully he told me later, by dipping his finger in milk and holding it to my lips, as one feeds a kid who has lost its goat-mother. My father made no enquiry

about me and seeing how he was, none in the great house cared. I became sickly and puling and, so the old servant told me, seemed *unlikely to live*, when late at night he heard a female voice wailing most forlornly just outside his fence. Rushing out, he found a gypsy-woman in her thirties seated on the ground with a dead baby, a boy, in her arms. After he had consoled her and helped to bury the child she said that six days ago her husband had been killed in a fight while gambling, and she had had to flee to escape being made a slave. Her time was near and while making her way to a place where she thought she would be safe, her son was born by the wayside. She had, with a little difficulty, delivered him herself and done all that was necessary. He had seemed quite healthy and had even smiled at her, she said, the tears coursing down her eyes. And, now, woe, woe, woe is me, she said, even he is dead. My grandfather's old servant, whose very look used to inspire confidence in all who saw him, took her by the elbow, and raising her up said, 'Come, to you who have lost a son, I give a daughter.' He then handed me over to her, telling her my story. We took to one another at once she told me, and she determined on that very first night that I must get my rights.

"Among us, as you know, lord, the naming is on the seventh day after birth and in noble households it is celebrated with great eclat. On the seventh day of my life, my foster-mother about the time of the evening meal, made me into a neat little bundle,—a bonny brave baby, I was, she said, capable of lying quite still and smiling and not being scared even then—and with it on her back walked into the great hall. My father sat disconsolate at the high table, playing with the viands they set before him, his face pale and wan, saying not one word and all around were also silent. Walking boldly up to the high table, she cried in a loud voice 'Chief, where is your daughter? Where then is she, this daughter of yours? Where have you hidden her? Produce her, let the naming be done.' My father looked at her blankly, then closed his eyes. Many attendants rushed up and tried to hustle her away, but she pushed them back forcefully and shouted 'Listen, chief, listen, I that speak to you speak not only in my own name. I speak in that of the Wise Woman, your grand-mother. I have a part in her for she was of my people and for her I speak today, demanding justice, justice for her own

great-granddaughter, justice from her own grandson. Aye, listen, chief and you all, or in her own dread name I shall lay upon you her own most powerful curse so that if you be men, women will shun you even your wives, and if you be women, men will turn away from you even your husbands.' And as silence fell and even my father began to attend, she started saying what she told me many years later she was quite sure never came from her; it was a power beyond her putting words in her mouth. 'Death, what is death, that you yield to him so uncontrollably, oh man! *The beloved has disappeared for* ever. Your heart is torn with sorrow, you neglect your duty, good to neglect the one pledge your beloved left behind to you? Consider the sorrow you are causing that beautiful spirit now by your total neglect of her blood. Repent, oh most culpable, most guilty, most selfish of men, repent. Seven days ago I was a greatly-loved wife. Six days ago I was a broken-hearted widow. That same night I was a gladdened mother. A day later, in my arms my son died. All was taken from me. My life was at an end. Yet life goes on, and here I am, demanding justice for your grandmother's great-granddaughter. So life will go on with you, too, chief, if you do not let Death turn you into a recreant coward. Here, here is your daughter, look upon her' and she threw open the bundle and held me up naked and she says, smiling and gurgling, for all to see. 'Pull up that table, give me that hanging of black velvet to put upon it, there, now lie there, precious, 'tis a great day for you, and now let me have a diamond, a ruby, an emerald, a deep-blue sapphire, yes rings will do; we set the diamond at her head and the ruby at her feet, the emerald by her right hand, and the sapphire by her left, yes. And give me that gold knife. See, chief, with this knife cut the fore-finger of my right hand, let the blood well out, now watch, I hold it in front of her eyes, does she weep, is she frightened, nay, equably she gazes at it, a right daughter of heroes, and now,' calling to her a beautiful young girl of about 12, without defect and without stain, as they say, 'hold my left hand, and so we walk round her, to the right and then back again, and touch her forehead and the tips of her ears with the blood of my fore-finger, and I name her, yes I dare name her, with the name of her great-grandmother, her mighty and cruel and warm, and wonderful great-grandmother. Rise, all of you, yes, even you, chief, rise in honour of our new Roumela Banoo.' Carried away by her spirit all responded, and so from

being an outcast, uncared-for, I was right at the centre of the family, held out, wrapped in a piece hurriedly cut from a silk multi-coloured turban, to my father, whom the circumstances compelled to hold me for a few minutes before thankfully handing me back.

"My foster-mother thereafter had her recognised place in the house-hold, and brought me up strictly and well, setting me among other things, to learn the knives on my fifth birthday. Four years after my naming, my father married again but my step-mother, somewhat overawed I should think by the strong personality of my foster-mother and the tale of her deeds, carefully avoided any conflict with her, and soon began to appreciate her single-hearted devotion to the family. All her three deliveries were managed by my foster-mother whom my step-brothers loved almost as much as I did. Only once did I see the naked steel of my foster-mother's nature in all the years she was with us, i. e. until she died of a serpent's sting two years ago (she seized and killed the reptile with her bare hands before her end came), and that was when my step-mother's youngest son, six-year old, died after the long fever. My foster-mother had been nursing the boy devotedly, and as the first crisis came nearer, she became even more determined to save him. You know how it is with that fever; it can break after three weeks or six or nine, and health comes back only very slowly thereafter. The third week crisis came and went and it was clear the little fellow had taken a turn for the better. My foster-mother, who had been with him night and day, was at last able to take a short time off and leaving the strictest instructions with the nurse working under her that the boy was not to be given any solid food at all, but only sweetened lemon water and a very little thin milk, she rode out with me to our little neighbourhood town. On our return, we found consternation, the boy clearly much worse. My foster-mother exchanged a few words with the nurse, then turned to my step-mother who sat in a great chair by the bed-side and just looked at her. Never have I seen such a look. Loathing, contempt, murderous intent all blazed in it equally. She then took my step-mother by the left ear, and jerking her to her feet said fiercely, 'So you had to give him halva, though you had been told my instructions. You just had to be kind, you murderess. I would plunge this dagger into your heart this second if I thought that would help my poor son. Yes, mine, for you are no mother, you are just a breeding fool.

Go, woman, go, get out of this house, go to your God-forsaken parents who have taught you only fancy notions, go anywhere but go. If I find you here when this angel has returned to his Father above, and it seems very likely he will now, I shall tear your limb from limb with my bare hands.' And leading her to the door still gripped by the ear she literally threw her out. In the early hours of the next day when the little boy, holding her hand, passed out into the endless ocean from whence he had come, a new sternness came upon her. Her laugh was never heard thereafter and even to make her smile was difficult. My step-mother with much pleading sought her pardon and eventually got it, but my foster-mother never looked at her directly again or spoke to her.

"The memory of her brings stinging tears to my eyes but courage to my heart, so you will understand, lord, this long digression of mine about her. You will get some idea too from it of the feeling of my father towards me. After all, he was forced to acknowledge me, his unfilialness shown up, and that perhaps rankled. Then they tell me I grow more like my mother with each year that passes, and I sometimes catch a tinge of disfavour on his face as he glances at me. On my last birthday I said to him, 'You would like me better perhaps if I were not too like my mother.' He took out a pair of enamelled earrings and set them in my ears himself, then sighed and said, 'Yes, it is true. I like you and yet I do not. Your mother was unique. She must remain unique.' So you see the likelihood of getting my parents' approval to this combination that bows before you humbly, is not great. In fact, we were just about deciding on running away and getting married quietly when your path crossed ours, lord."

"You were, were you?" said the Assistant Collector looking at the young man and when he signified assent, "God in Heaven forgive me, lady, but are you too just a breeding fool? I took you for a person of much sense. And you, young man, are you so bemused that you have forgotten all your responsibilities as the head of your people? You do realise what an elopement would mean, both of you? A first-rate blood-feud, you two flying from pillar to post, thicket to thicket, always pursued, always hiding, liable to meet at any moment a grisly end with overwhelming odds against

you. And your house, young man, is it so well-defended a fort that it can resist the strength the lady's father would bring against it? Do you want to see it in flames, your aged dependents slaughtered or burnt? A fine crop of murders and counter-murders for me to deal with, the whole country-side distracted! Now, listen, and bear in mind that what follows is being said not by your easy-going, merry-singing, tale-listening companion of this morning. These are the words of the Sirkar itself. Says the Sirkar: 'Oh woman and oh man, put right out of your minds all thought of elopement and secret marriage. Promise forthwith each of you singly and both of you jointly that no infantile folly of that kind you will allow yourself to get entangled in. And if you do not promise, warns the Sirkar, it will, despite your daggers, woman and your axe, man, knock you both unconscious here and now and leave you tied up to be brought to its camp in handcuffs later, there to be bound down for six months for attempt to commit suicide, sureties not to be accepted, parties to be kept separately in jail. The Sirkar has spoken.'" "Yes, but lord, then, what is to become of us? Must we remain separated for ever? My parents will never consent to our marriage," said the lady. "That is the point, lord, to be without one another is in any case to be dead, not that I do not see the strength of your argument about the blood-feud. So you see, lord," said the young man. The Assistant Collector's face turned to stone, all feeling wiped out completely from it, and in even, level tones came the words, "Seeing two contumacious miscreants before it, the Sirkar proceeds to deliver to them their deserts." He took two steps backwards, and gripping a staff tipped with ironrings that had been leaning against a tree-trunk, shook it to test its balance. "Take that look off your face, lord, and I promise everything and anything you want. I can't bear to have you looking at us like that," cried the lady. "Of course you're right, lord," said the young man. "We couldn't possibly fight you over this." "Good then," said the Assistant Collector, relaxing and dropping the lorh, "no elopements, no secret marriages, sure?" "Yes, lord, yes, quite" chorused both.

"Excellent," said the Assistant Collector, "now we three become a council of colleagues to consider how best to fulfil a very desirable, highly praiseworthy aim from both the public and private points of view, to wit, to bring about a marriage in full amity and harmony of all parties concerned between this very brave, very handsome,

very capable young chief and this superbly queenly, exceedingly beautiful, highly intelligent young lady. Obstacles? Birth: none. Why, the saint-poet of the eighth century praised our young soldier's direct ancestor, who bore the same outlandish name as he does, for courtesy, chivalry and sympathy even more than for courage and generalship. Doesn't he say

"What kings with rich gifts could scarcely command
Freely to widow and orphan he gave
The poor and the oppressed he served all his life,
For he was Alfresun, Alfresun, true knight."

Love: none. Overwhelming on both sides and so far as the human eye, liable to error always, can tell, likely to last a life-time. Suitability: none. Each seems to possess qualities complementary to the other, making together a very worthwhile due. We have clear evidence too that the great ones of the past approve Fortune: Ah, there we have it, very great discrepancy. In view of that, very little possibility of causing relatives most closely concerned, proud, somewhat snobbish step-mother, equally proud, somewhat anti-daughter father, to budge from an obstinate no. Have I put the case fairly, colleagues?" "Indisputably, lord." said the lady. "Would the solution were as clear!" "God willing, that too will come," said the Assistant Collector. "All we want is one factor, the factor that will reconcile the hard-hearted parents to the, let's put it bluntly, poverty of the suitor. Can it be urged he has something that will counterbalance this disadvantage? Let us think; think hard you two, there must have been such cases in the past and they must have been solved; my scribe-mind, as you see, turns to precedents, though I am often told both by my senior and my subordinate colleagues that I am too inclined to make my own precedents. Well? Ah, ha, I have one from the seventh century that perhaps may fit. Do either of you know the old language before the saintpoet's days? No. Well, listen and see if you can understand this." And the Assistant Collector sang in the old language in a reedy, nasal tenor.

The king, he said,
I'll have you wed,
To that richest prince's daughter.

The poor soldier who loved,
*Yet feared in his love*
Said 'Monarch, would you have my neck shorter?'
'Come, come,' said the king
'As in battle be brave
'Tis I will make the offer.
The worst he can do is but to refuse,
And then? As God wills it, good fellow.'

Do you follow?" "Yes, lord, the substance not all the words," said the lady. "Tell us, lord, how do you come to know it?" "Now, you must not keep on getting me into digressions. Still it's an incident I am glad to recall so I'll tell you. Once, at a camp in the far north country an old man brought me a manuscript to look at. I struggled with it one way and another for three nights after work was over, then deciding it was beyond me, went to sleep and dreamt a dream of a high flat table-land with a hut on it, an old sage and a young maiden. Enquiring next morning, I was told the tableland I described was six miles away and yes, on it there was a deserted hut. That evening I went up to the hut alone carrying my sleeping-bag, biscuits and fruit, and the honey-liquor that comes from the North, too, only *from the North 3,000 miles away. By candle-light, I had* my evening meal then laid myself down to sleep. The first false dawn must have been in the sky when it seemed to me a sudden radiance filled the hut, and an extremely affable and smiling dervish sat on a 'gadi', listening to the reading of a manuscript by a young girl, who seemed to be using not her eyes, but the tips of her *fingers to* follow the marks on the manuscript she held. I listened intently to the tale of high romance she related and also to his learned allegorical critique on it, relating its love to the love of God and so forth. When I woke with the sunlight pouring in, the hut was as it had been the previous evening. Thanking God for his mercies, I rushed back to camp and taking up the manuscript in the desk, found it made the most perfect sense.

"So, let us take that for a sign and use the seventh-century precedent. Though not a king, I am the local servant of the laws

and thus stand in loco parentis to all within the boundaries of this sub-division. You have no elders to propose, as is usual, on your behalf. So I take upon myself as in duty bound the role of your elder, and the formal proposal to the lady's father I make as your father or uncle would for their son or nephew. Well, do you both agree? Yes? We must go into all the details, so you had better be at the camp at five this evening. Now there is no doubt that you must get some money and must use that money not on marriage fineries but on the improvement of your land. That sixteen acre you were talking about and we saw together, Rs 1,500/- would be enough you think to lower the level sufficiently to let you irrigate by flow. I can't say for certain but that manuscript you left with me seems valuable. You must take it to T. at the provincial headquarters with a letter from me and come back with Rs 2,000 for it. We have no time to waste, so you'd better prepare to leave tonight's train from the station 10 miles from my camp. No, lady, don't look so desolate. If I am taking him away from you it is only for a short while and in order to return him to you for ever. That's good smile. You know I pin great hopes on your great-grandmother's appearing to him. She wouldn't have done that, if we'd been intended to fail. So keep your spirits up. And now, I must go. God be with you both and all go well with you." "Lord, lord," cried the lady in a choked voice. "Yes, Roumela Banoo," said the Assistant Collector, putting his hand upon her back, "but you should not have done that, no saint am I, no dervish even, only the simple servant of the laws who tries to do his duty as he sees it, and God willing, generally sees it not wrongly. Good-bye now and remember, no wild fancies nor even flying knives." So, leaving the two, the Assistant Collector hastened back to his camp, trying to make up for lost time by taking the last mile at a jog-trot.

## VII

Fifty yards from the camp the Assistant Collector dropped into a walk, for he saw Dhanji the butler who had obviously been watching out for him turn and begin to stroll toward his own little tent at the back. As he joined him, Dhanji asked, "All is well, Sir ?" "As you see," said the Assistant Collector, "and here ?" "Now, yes," sighed Dhanji, "but until a moment ago, I had visions of a crowd pouring through the tents in search of you, and at least the Naik and I being badly beaten up." "But why," asked the Assistant Collector. "You will hear if you slip into your tent from the back, Sir," said Dhanji, "the Naik is holding the front entrance, so to speak." As the Assistant Collector entered the middle room of the tent from the back, a loud authoritative voice made itself heard from the entrance. "This will not do, Naik Sahib, no, Naik Sardar Mohamed Khan, it will not do. Tell us where the lord is. Do you know or don't you ? That heart of gold, it has no fear and it knows no guile. Such a rare one, danger always flashes round like lightning. And you will not even tell us where he is. Why, he may be in a fight this minute, single-handed against four or five. Or he may be lying wounded with none to hold him up. One thing is certain, oh Sardar, if anything has happened to him, it will go very ill with all of you, aye especially with you, Mohamed Khan. He must be protected, looked after, kept from taking deadly risks. That's what you all are for, you-."

"Oh Rais of Raises," interrupted the Assistant Collector from inside, recognising the voice of the 80-year old doyen of the gentry, "will you stop tearing to bits our very efficient and devoted Naik ? I am sorry to have caused my friends anxiety, but surely there was nothing to be anxious about. It is just eleven, and the time for petitions is not till three. What brings you all here ? Nothing un-

toward, I hope." "Praise be to God, sweeter than the sweetest music is your voice to us at this moment, lord. Your riding-camel was out grazing, your horse in the stable tent, the village-officers in their office, your attendants off-duty and silence brooded over your tent. At nine some of us came round, and then at ten to find out, but the Naik would say nothing, so when half an hour ago they told me there was still no sign of you, I came too. You see, lord, danger seeks you so,—" "Come, come," said the Assistant Collector, "let us not make ourselves unhappy with apprehensions. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart for your care. God be with you until we meet in the afternoon. You will forgive me for not coming out, I have a great deal to do between now and then. But hold, what brought you to this camp in any case, noble Rais ? If it is anything urgent, sit down and I shall be with you in ten minutes." "No, lord, nothing urgent, nor even business. My great-grandson, who is just seven, is staying with me for a few days. He has naturally heard much about you and asked endless questions since he knew I knew you, so I said, come, we'll go and hear the lord deal with petitioners this afternoon. As I had a little business at the village, we rode in early." "And is he with you now ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes, he is," said the Rais. "Oh, then you must wait, Rais. Do sit down both of you. I'll join you shortly." The Naik, who had come in, shook his head despairingly and raised his eyebrows to indicate "what now." The Assistant Collector smiled, and disappeared into the side-room to immerse himself in the tub of hot water Dhanji had got ready and change quickly into his usual work-a-day clothes.

The old Rais shook him warmly by the hand as he came out, and presented to him his great-grandson, a handsome boy, tall for his age, with a most engaging smile and the merriest twinkle in his eyes. "Peace be with you, your Sir," said the Assistant Collector. "And with you be Peace, lord, and long life," was the boy's reply. "How long a man may live is not his to determine," said the Assistant Collector, as all three sat down, "but how a man may live, well or ill, honourably or disgracefully, is almost always his, so to you I wish an honourable and worthy life, one on which when you grow old, you can look back without much self-reproach." "Lord," said the boy, "were you ever beaten ?" "As a boy you

mean by elders? Yes, at least three times I can remember very vividly. And also, of course, I have been beaten up twice as a man by scoundrels. Why, have you been chastised recently?" "Yes, lord, by my mother, and I felt very angry and still feel very angry. How dared the woman touch me?" said the boy, flushing red. "What had you done?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Well, lord, it is the kite season, and everything depends in kite-fights on the sharpness of your string, so I always smear mine with the finest glass I can find, and there were two little glass-bottles, oh such sharp glass fragments they made, on my mother's table and I took them and used them and do you know lord, I cut down twenty-one kites in three days, and still she was very angry when she didn't find them, and she told me she had told me never to touch them, which was true, and so, she slapped me on the cheeks half-a-dozen times, and though the pain was not much, I couldn't help crying from sheer vexation, and oh, lord, I felt so unhappy but just couldn't do anything, so I asked my father to let me go to great-grandfather for a visit and he did," said the boy. "Come, we must go," said the old Rais, "we can't take up the lord's time with this kind of thing, boy." "No, no, sit down, Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "this is most interesting. Tell me, young Rais, now at this moment do you think you did right or wrong in taking your mother's two small bottles, perfume bottles they were I presume, yes, and smashing them to bits for your kite-string?" "Oh, wrong, of course, lord, I can see that," said the boy. "Well, then, what are you angry with your mother about? You did wrong, she corrected you; surely she did only her duty," said the Assistant Collector. "Yes, lord, but she was so angry, and anyhow a woman has no business to hit a man, has she?" cried the boy. "Let us deal with your second point first. Has a female a right to hit a male when the circumstances warrant it? Why, of course. Who has a better right? Who goes through the pain of bringing males into the world? No, no, get right out of your head the idea that the man alone has the privilege of physical chastisement. Why, only recently, I met one lady and heard of another, both of whom could pour death into a regiment of men for the right reasons. Whatever we men may choose to believe, remember always in reality women are as good as, often better than, men. Your first point was she corrected you angrily. Well, you know, to punish without anger or vexation, just because the punishment is deserved and has to be inflicted, this is given only to a very few. An

English poet whom you will no doubt read later if you go to high school calls it "to sacrifice as a priest, not to kill as a butcher". My noble father of blessed memory had the gift, no emotion at all he brought to the task of punishing; it was a duty and he did it. But for a mother, it must almost be impossible. Her reluctance to beat a loved son just couldn't be overcome if she were not in a passion, so that was inevitable." "What then should I do, lord?" said the boy, almost in tears. "Think it over yourself, son. What can a man do when he knows he has done wrong and caused pain to someone he is very fond of?" asked the Assistant Collector. "I know, lord," said the boy, beginning to smile, "it will be hard, but I'll go to her and say I am very very sorry and ask her to forgive me." "Excellent," said the Assistant Collector, "may your smile always be as engaging as it is now, and the twinkle in your eye as merry. And now before you go, you must sweeten your mouth. See, here comes Dhanji." Two small paper boxes, one of chocolates and one of candied fruit, Dhanji held open on a salver, and the boy hesitatingly helped himself to a chocolate, whereupon Dhanji, having offered them to the old Rais and the Assistant Collector, closed them up, and slipped them into the young boy's jacket-pockets. "Lord," said the boy, rising to his feet and bowing deeply, "it has been a truly precious privilege to have had the most distinguished honour of this conversation with you. Rightly are you renowned as the solver of all difficulties." "Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "I congratulate your great-grandfather and your mother on the excellence of your address no less than on your quick perception of right and wrong. God protect you always." The old Rais, who had listened in wonderment to the whole conversation, gazed misty-eyed at the Assistant Collector, embraced him warmly and said, "Thank you lord, thank you very, very much for everything."

Going into the main room of the tent, the Assistant Collector found there the Sheristedar and the Naik, looking at one another, while Dhanji laid the table for brunch. "We heard everything," said the Sheristedar. "And why not?" said the Assistant Collector. "Any comments?" "Sir, it was a poem, a true poem, that whole conversation. I tell you it inspired me. Here is my idea. Give up all

this governing business, lord. It's too coarse for a fine spirit like yours. Start a school, a true educational institute, all the young of all the best people will come, and you will bring them up to be honourable, sensible, decent, good, honest, why in ten years you'll bring about a revolution of the heart. Violence will disappear, reason will prevail, everyone will recognise the right and want to do it. You can succeed, Sir, no one else can make people realise their better natures as fully as you can. That little boy, how seriously you treated him, how you made him face up to right and wrong and come to the correct conclusion. I will give up recording evidence and be your humble helper. Mohamed Khan too I am sure will be with us. *Do please, Sir, let us all do something truly useful with our lives.*" "Splendid, oh Sufi," said the Assistant Collector, "a very noble thought. But unfortunately at the moment we may have a most vicious blood-feud on our hands and must act quickly and appropriately to prevent it. Now, listen, both of you, and you also, Dhanji," and he gave them a resume of the case of the two lovers and of how he proposed to deal with it.

The faces of the Sheristedar and the Naik grew grave as the Assistant Collector proceeded and they both sighed softly as he came to the part about his sponsoring the proposal on behalf of the young chief. Finishing, he looked at them, but not a word came from either. Turning to Dhanji he said, "What do you think?" "Well, Sir, *there* was nothing else to do, I can see that, but it's going to be a very ticklish business," was the answer. "Much more than ticklish," said Pribhdas, "probably disastrous. If they say No, what can we do? Nothing. We shall have disgraced ourselves and in addition the couple by running away afterwards will bring on the blood-feud which we will have to cope with. You are wise, Sir, but –," "One thing is certain, Sir," said the Naik, "you can sponsor the proposal but the making of it can only be by a lady of high degree. You can't just ride up and make it, great as are your position and your own personal prestige. If you did that, izzat would demand your not being allowed to leave the estate alive. No, a respected lady of a mighty house would be best, failing of course the sponsor's own wife." "That," said the Assistant Collector smiling, "being impossible, where do we look around for our noble lady? Hasn't our young champion an elderly relative who would be suitable? Mohamed Khan,

you know the geneology and ramifications of this family? Yes? Think then." "Why, of course, there is the young man's grandfather's sister, the most noble, the distinguished-above-all Zubeida Khanum," said the Naik. "If she would agree, nothing could be better. You must have heard of her, Sir," "Why yes, I have," said the Assistant Collector, "isn't she the lady who fighting by her husband's side, stood over him after he had been felled and killed nine more before her turban being dislodged by a stroke, her long hair streaming out, revealed her to be a woman? They say the enemy were so discomfited they flung down their arms and shouted, 'Noble lady, we surrender. Do with us what you will.' She stood there, looking at them and at her husband's body and finally collapsed by his side. They carried her in a litter and her husband's body in another, right upto his door, and laid both down. When his brother's sons came out with their men to fall upon them as they stood there, she rose from her litter, faced her nephews and said, "These men are no longer our enemies. They respected your uncle and chief, they protected his wife, your aunt, when both were unable to fend for themselves. Take them inside, let them bathe, give them food, then part in amity" and so it was done. This is the great Zubeida Khanum, yes? Well, we must obviously seek her assistance.

"Now Pribhdasji, here is the manuscript the young chief left with me. To get him out of the way and prevent anything hasty being done by the lovers, I am sending him tonight with it to T. at the provincial capital. Please write a letter to T. in as fine a hand as you can—he enjoys good calligraphy—and put in all the honorifics possible—he is very fond of himself and loves being complimented. Tell him of the high worth of the young owner and also his need for substantial cash. Dwell on the merits of the manuscript, say how the thought had arisen of keeping it for examination by an expert from Europe who is supposed to be shortly visiting these parts, but how it had seemed utterly wrong that this masterpiece should not be with all the others T. had so assiduously collected, to have a place in the great volume to which this humble student, along with so many great ones, was looking forward with anxious eagerness, the volume which he felt sure would be fully worthy of the great talent of the scholar par excellence that was the noble T. Hint that ardent as is our devotion to the cause of scholarship and much as we

would like such works to be donated, in this case there can be no parting except on the basis of payment, of the amount he being the best judge, of course. Yet, considering that far rougher scripts were nowadays fetching large sums, we were sure our most worthy agriculturist would benefit substantially from the sound business sense and well-known liberality of the generous T. With this in hand, we will have to see that he leaves on the 10 o'clock train from the station nearest to us; then we shall have a week at least to try and settle the business before he gets back. He is to be here at 5. Do you think you can get it done?" "Yes, Sir, I shall settle down to it at 4 and it should be ready by 6.15, but of course the writing cannot possibly be as fine as in the manuscript," said the Sheristedar. "Naturally, naturally, Sheristedar Sahib, had you the weeks or months that centuries-old calligraphist had, I would wager without hesitation you would do at least as well; even as it is, your handiwork will undoubtedly do us credit in the city. And Pribhdasji, would you kindly be back here in half-an-hour. I would like you to be present while I deal with the business that took me out this morning. Mohamed Khan, be so good as to send word to the village officer in whose beat village X is to please come over with his record. I'll just have finished brunch by then."

The Assistant Collector looked up in surprise at the tall soldierly figure that walked in carrying a bundle of records and maps half-an-hour later. "Dawood Khan," he said, "what are you doing here?" "You sent for me, Sir," was the reply. "But you were not the officer who accompanied me on inspection yesterday morning," claimed the Assistant Collector. "No, Sir, he was in temporary charge of my work as I had been summoned to give evidence about a survey dispute twenty miles away. Village X is in my beat." God, thought the Assistant Collector, this is a truly frightful affair. Only the other day, if this young lion hadn't broken his way in through the patharidar's high thorn-fence, all six of us inside would have fed the kites. And today? Come, oh servant of the laws, obey the laws, do your duty, let the axe fall wherever it deserves to. Then taking hold of himself, "Dawood Khan, bring me the map of the village and the field-book. Now the entries in the field-book about these particular survery nos. have been made by you?" "Yes." "They are correct?" "Yes." "Did you make them after verifying them on the site?"

"No, Sir." "How then do you say they are correct?" "No change has taken place in this area for many years. I asked the landlord's agent. He said they were the same as last year both as regards crops and water supply." "You know it was wrong of you not to make sure for yourself?" "Yes." "How do you describe your conduct, then?" "Negligent, Sir." "Let me tell you that all these survey numbers you have shown as irrigated by lift are in reality lift aided by flow. You are astonished?" "Yes, Sir." "What would be the difference in the assessment leviable on the area because of this?" "Nearly two thousand five hundred rupees, Sir." "On the basis of your entries then bills being made, the State would have been mulcted and the landlord benefitted, to that extent?" "Yes, Sir." "How do you describe your conduct now?" "Utterly regrettable, culpably negligent, Sir." "H'm," said the Assistant Collector, leaning back in his chair and looking fixedly at the six-footer, standing at attention a few feet away from the table, his breathing a little laboured, his face slightly pale, "Now listen carefully. Did you, Dawood Khan, receive anything in cash or in kind for making these wrong entries that would have saved the zemindar over two thousand rupees at the cost of the State?" The even, hard tones of the Assistant Collector's voice had scarcely ceased, when from Dawood Khan came in a roar, "Now for me nothing remains but to kill you and then kill myself," and his right hand fell on the hilt of the dagger in his waist-belt. The Naik took a step forward, only to be halted by a gesture from the Assistant Collector, who still looking straight into the village officer's eyes said, his voice at its usual pitch, "Much remains, Dawood Khan, much remains, for you are not a fool. What will you prove by killing me and then yourself? That you were not bribed? Or that you took the bribe? How will men talk of you? How will they judge you? You say you must kill me and then yourself. Kill me, because I have insulted and disgraced you, kill yourself because by killing me, your senior, you will have disgraced yourself. Now why do you take this view? Because you think of yourself and me in personal terms: I, A., am insulting you, Dawood Khan, so you must avenge yourself. But is our relationship a personal one? What are you? A servant of the laws. What am I? A servant of the laws. Are you my servant? No. Am I your master? No. We are both colleagues engaged in a common task, each with his duties assigned to him. Your duty is to do certain

*things exactly, accurately,* honestly. My duty is among other things to supervise you in the performance of your duties. Now, supposing *you had been in my* place and I in yours and you had found out these ghastly wrong entries, could you have avoided asking me the *question I asked you?* Think, man. To kill is easy, a movement, a throw, blood all over this table, a servant of the laws no more. Is *that* the best Dawood Khan, descendant of generations of truly brave and faith-keeping warriors, can do? Answer me, answer, I put the question to you again and I, your colleague, superior in office and rank to you, demand from you the clear straightforward answer that alone befits a man like you," and in a loud, firm voice "Did you, Dawood Khan, receive anything in cash or in kind for making these wrong entries that would have saved the zemindar over two thousand rupees at the cost of the State?"

Dawood Khan's breast heaved with emotion; his face showed that anger, indignation, horror, reason were fighting a pitched battle within him. At last, dropping his hand from the hilt of his dagger and swaying on his feet, he said in a kind of cracked voice No, then louder No, No, then fiercely in a shout No, of course No. All the time the Assistant Collector's eyes never left his. Slowly, still looking into his eyes, the Assistant Collector said, "No, you say, of course No. I agree, it is of course No. Dawood Khan, sit down. If you want to faint, do it comfortably seated." Quickly the Naik took the man's elbow and eased him into a chair. "Lord," said Dawood Khan in a moaning voice, "I do not know what is wrong with me but I feel, I *feel* I *must weep. Forgive* me, lord, I weep." And he sobbed, tears pouring from his eyes, bedewing his cheeks and beard and chest. *Quickly Dhanji hurried forward, a mug of very hot, very sweet tea* in his hand, "There, brother, there drink this. No wonder you weep. *Who would not? Surely have you been tried. Come come,*" "Let him weep," said the Assistant Collector, his hand shading his own *eyes.* "*When powerful emotion has held sway, even to a strong man* weeping may bring comfort. Sikander wept and so did Rustom, *when even their great hearts found the strain of life too much for* them. So, Dawood Khan, hurry not, let the tears run out, and drink that tea. *Dhanji will* get you some more when you've finished it," "Forgive me, lord, forgive me, what will you gentlemen think of me? This is most unlike me, you know," said

Dawood Khan struggling up. "Sit down, Dawood Khan, sit down quietly for three minutes. Then you can get up and go. And I'll give you a task before you go." So for three minutes there was complete silence, then the Assistant Collector said, "Five days hence, I shall be at camp Y, 12 miles from here. Report there to me, having meanwhile visited every field in your beat and verified in person, the entries in the field-book about it. It will mean being in the saddle more than nine hours each day. You follow?" "Yes, lord, I do, I do indeed," said Dawood Khan smiling. "Permit me to say, lord, that though you are harder than steel and make men tear their hearts open for you to look into them, it is a privilege to serve under you, what was it you said, to be a colleague of yours, not only a privilege, nay, God forgive me I must say it, a pleasure, too." Drawing himself up to his full height, he saluted magnificently. As the salute ended and his right hand came to his side, the Assistant Collector stepped forward from behind his table and clasping it warmly, said "God protect you Dawood Khan and peace be with you in all your riding."

As Dawood Khan left, the Assistant Collector himself seemed a little unsteady on his feet. Suddenly he found he was in his canvas arm-chair, with the Naik holding a long glass to his lips, and Dhanji rubbing eau de cologne on his forehead. "Eh, what is this nonsense," he said trying to get up but being kept down by Pribhdas's hand on his shoulder, "Sit still, Sir," said the Naik. "To force a man's soul out of his body, to make him hold it up so that he and you we can look at it—few feats can equal that, but it has to be paid for; one cannot escape altogether," said the Sheristedar. "No bards will sing this deed for none saw it, but it is certainly among your greatest. The grace of God is with you, lord, I ask your blessing." "God bless you Pribhdasji and all of us here, His sinners and servants. Come, now, come, there's work to do, the Head Munshi had some urgent cases Perhaps, we can deal with them before we begin with the petitioners. And thank you all very much for your help in this heartbreaking business we've had to go through."

## VIII

The petitioners that day produced nothing of note until about toward the end when an old woman, somewhat bowed and leaning upon a staff, stepped forward. "Lord," she said, "I have come to talk with you." "You are welcome, nobility," answered the Assistant Collector. "I am not noble, lord, nor well-off. I have but a small cottage and live by myself," said the old lady. "Nonetheless," said the Assistant Collector, "your countenance has the look that goes with true nobility. Speak." A long tale the old woman related, the history of her life, her marriage, her children, three sons and two daughters, her husband's death in battle, the struggle to bring up her children on small means, a cousin's enmity, her eldest son's fight against him and eventual success, his death from illnes, her daughters' marriages and departure to distant places, her second and third sons settling in lands across the seas, where they were doing well, but were far, far away, her old age, the pains that oppressed her now from time to time and would yield to no treatment. When she finished, the Assistant Collector asked, "And how may I serve you, lady?" "You already have, lord. Well and truly have you served me by listening to me for so long, attentively and without the least sign of impatience. You see, lord, of late I have felt very lonely. I am not generally a chatterer and keep myself very much to myself, but recently the desire to talk became overwhelming and so when I learnt of your camp here I thought I would come and unburden myself to you. Forgive me for wasting your precious time. I have no request to make, no claim to urge, I wanted to be heard by a sympathetic listener and by the grace of God I found him. Peace be with you, lord." "And with you, noble lady, and may all your days and nights be painless," said the Assistant Collector. "And my end, lord," asked the woman, "my end?" "And your end," said the Assistant Collector, pausing for the right word "And your end, serene." "Serene," exclaimed the

old woman, "serene, thank you lord, thank you very much. What a beautiful end, serene," and she stepped back, smiling.

Her place was taken by an attractive young woman with a petulant look, who handed over a written petition. "Did you write this yourself ?" asked the Assistant Collector after looking it over. "No, I didn't, does it matter ?" was the sharp reply. "Can you read and write ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Of course not," said the young woman. "Do you know what is in it ?" "Yes, yes, of course, I asked the man to write, so he put down what I said." "Well, then," said the Assistant Collector, "you told him to write this, did you ?" and he read "The first flush of my youth is blooming like the opening rose but its perfume is wasted for my husband is old. I long for the bulbul that will fulfil my rose, but long, alas in vain, for my husband is old." "Please, please, lord, don't read any more, of course I didn't tell him to say that" cried the young woman, her face suffused with blushes, while a roar of laughter rose from the spectators. "Well, now, then, supposing we put this fine rhetorical effusion aside," said the Assistant Collector, "and you tell me yourself what your trouble is, and what you want." "Lord," said the young woman, "I have left my husband of my own free will and I want to make this clear so that I may not be harassed later by him and others with trumped-up charges. That is all." "Ah," said the Assistant Collector, "how long have you been married, have you any children and who is your husband ?" "I have been married for two years. I have one daughter, a year old, whom I have left behind; my husband's name I will not tell, but he lives outside your jurisdiction, lord. And I have let him because I am fed up with him. He is always busy with other things and has very little time for me, and I am young. So you see," said the young woman. "And do you not fear to feel his sharp axe on your neck one night ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, lord," she said, "he is a strange man, he never kills if he can help it," "Why," cried a spectator, "she is speaking of the Hakim Sahib, our kind and skilful physician who lives in the village on the other side of the river from us. Yes, I recognise her, she is the Hakim Sahib's wife, lord. Oh disgraceful woman, your husband may not kill you, but by God, many of us will, if you abuse his gentleness and forbearance."

"Come, come," said the Assistant Collector, " remember where you are. No threats, no harsh words, here. Anyone who kills or troubles anyone else will have to answer to me." And to the woman "How old are you, and how old is your husband?" "I am twenty-one and he about forty-five, too old for me any way," said the woman. "How did your marriage come about?" asked the Assistant Collector. "I was living with my brother in our place, 50 miles to the South, and he was tired of my behaviour, so when the Hakim who was on a visit to a patient, saw me and offered, he accepted him gladly, and so to tell the truth did I for I wanted above all things a change." "You wanted a change then and you want a change now. A rather restless person you are, don't you think?" said the Assistant Collector. "One lives but once, lord," said the young woman boldly, "one must make the best of it." "Aye," said the Assistant Collector, "if it is truly the best one makes but one may well make the worst of it in the process. However, what of the future? Do you go back to your brother?" "No, lord," said the woman, "the man who wrote this petition tells me he will give me profitable employment, and after a time, who knows, he says he might arrange for me a suitable marriage." "You decided to leave your husband after knowing this man, did you?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, I only met him this morning. I left my home early yesterday. This man only suggested that I put in this application to avoid trouble for the future. I now wish I hadn't done it. I didn't know I would have so much bother. Please, lord, may I go?" said the woman. "Just a minute, this man is in the village, is he?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes, he is and he has two other women travelling with him, too," was the reply. "Well clearly we must get him here and also those ladies," said the Assistant Collector. "Meanwhile you must wait." Stepping back with a shrug and an angry frown, the woman looked around, then cried out, "Why there he is, at the back of the crowd, and the two women are with him, too. Thank goodness, now you can ask him what you want and we can get on. That well-dressed man with the yellow silk jacket." The Assistant Collector looked at the Naik, who walked quickly towards a handsome, reckless-looking young man, very fashionably dressed, his beard well-curled, a silver perfume-box in one hand, an enamelled riding-switch in the other, and urged him forward, beckoning to the two women with him to follow.

Scarcely had the young man stepped in front and made the Assistant Collector a courtly bow, when a brightly-clad youth in the first row of spectators, who was accounted a notable traveller by his home-staying neighbours cried out, "Why, it's the famous Gulal, who owns the House of Joy in the city two hundred miles to the South. He is very well known there you know and thought of very highly by all the world of fashion. Yes, it is he." "Is that true, Sir ?" asked the Assistant Collector, "Are you a brothel-keeper ?" Shuddering all over his body and applying the perfume-box to his nose several times, the fashionably-dressed young man said, "Oh, the rude North ! What a word to use, A, a--, no I can't say it. I have a few houses undoubtedly to which young men who are well-endowed resort, schools, so to speak, for the removal of inhibitions and the teaching of manners. But that is all. The utmost gentility, I assure you. Polite society, pleasant recreation, the practice of the arts, singing, dancing, the study of exotic literature, science from all quarters of the globe readily available through skilled practitioners. A veritable university, in fact, lord, no student ever fails there" "H'm," said the Assistant Collector, "a brothel-keeper truly. And the profitable employment you offered this petitioner," pointing to the married woman, "was in that House of Joy no doubt." "Well, lord, I will not deny that. Just look at her. Is she not admirably fitted for the art ? Clearly it was her metier. She has just the proper air" "You did not tell her what you intended though, did you ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, lord, how could I ? Women are so queer; she would have taken fright perhaps for no reason at all, not even realising that this was her great chance," said the young man. "Well, young lady, now you know what your good friend has chosen for you, do you still wish to go with him ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Lord," said the woman, "this man, so handsome seeming, is a devil. I know what happens to the women who live in these places. One of them came to die in our village. No, lord, no, never. I would rather kill myself than go further with him."

"Now, you two, what about you ?" said the Assisfant collector, turning to the two women who had accompanied the fashionable young man. "Are you proposing to go along with him ?" The women looked at one another, totally bewildered, then one said, "He told us

that he could easily in view of our fine physique get us married in *small zemindar households, where the men had no money to pay the* bride-price. He would get a good fee, we would get good husbands. He talks so convincingly, lord, and he treated us with such respect—we have been travelling with him and his two servants for over forty-eight hours—that we readily believed him. Thank God, we learned what he really is in time. No lord, we do not go with him, but what is to happen to us, I do not know." "Well, supposing each of you tells us what brought her to this plight, perhaps something might arise," said the Assistant Collector. "I," said the one who had spoken "am twenty-eight. I was engaged to be married to a youth I loved, when one night, the enemy fell upon his village and wiped it out with all its inhabitants. I was seventeen then and though my brother with whom I lived tried to get me married several times, I just could not get myself to agree. Recently he has married the queen of all subtle shrews, and life became so difficult for me with her turning my brother against me, that I decided to leave." "I was married, lord," said the other, "and very happy in the love of my husband. I bore two children, a boy and a girl, but God took them away. Suddenly, three days ago, my husband came back from a trip with a very handsome woman, much better-looking than me, and said she too was his wife. I seized an axe and rushed to kill the intruder. She was fleet of foot and fled up the steps even upto the roof-tower, I following, axe in hand. Just as my axe was descending for the fatal blow, my husband caught me from behind and carrying me down, beat me cruelly. I called him every name I could think of, and told him I would certainly kill that woman sooner or later. 'Look,' he said, 'there are too many ties between us for me to kill you. I give you your deferred dower and divorce you. Go in peace and leave me in peace.' 'Peace, indeed,' I cried, 'Alas that my brothers are dead, and my people scattered. Else I would have shown you peace.' However, the **mahr** I took and left his house as soon as possible. Some day, God willing, some day-." "Well, ladies," said the Assistant Collector, "after such grievous misfortunes in life's voyaging, it is only meet that you be settled in safe havens. If we can in any way help to bring about that desirable end, we shall count it a privilege. Now, *Mohamed Khan, what about this? Do you think it will work?*

There are nearly 500 gathered outside. Supposing you proclaim the two eligible ladies here are considering marriage with suitable husbands, no bride-price required. Those who wish to can speak in person, specifying the one they wish to marry. The decision will rest with the ladies themselves and there must be no questioning of their choices and no disputes about it. All present are welcome to give advice and to mention any disqualifications on the part of the persons applying, so that the ladies who have no personal knowledge of the locality can be properly guided. This is a task of much merit, let all help. What say you, ladies ?" A smile broke forth on the perplexed face of the first lady, and turning to the other, she embraced her. Then both, looking at the Assistant Collector, said enthusiastically, " It's a wonderful idea, lord. If it goes through, we promise you we shall make your men devoted and loyal wives." " And you, Mohamed Khan," said the Assistant Collector, " How think you ? " " Well, Sir, marriages made after much deliberation also sometimes end in shipwreck, so why not this ? Yes, let's try."

Moving forward a little, with a loud clap of his hands, the Naik called the assemblage to attention and then in a truly carrying voice, set out the position, pointing to the two ladies as prizes. Such was the dignity of his bearing, the seriousness of his voice, that not even a tipple of laughter passed over the large crowd. Men began to look at one another and at the two women, who now the plunge had been taken, stood their ground, superbly unconcerned, their gazes directed into middle space. A few minutes of silence, and then a tall, decoratively-turbaned man stood up and said, "Lord, I offer myself for the taller lady. I am a widower, my wife died a year ago. I have two children, five and three, who need a mother. You have seen my land. Bread and meat are not lacking in my house, though I have no wealth. I kill in fair fight, but never otherwise. If any here know anything to my disadvantage, let him say so freely. Of me he has leave, and I shall bear him no malice for it. I was a good husband, her relatives will tell you, to my last wife, and God willing, I shall make you a good husband, too, lady, if you will have me." The Assistant Collector looked around and signalled to a village-officer, and then to the lady in question. " Tell about him," he said to the village-officer. " Land about 300 acres, lord," said the village-officer, " 140 acres flow, two crops, good cultivator,

drives the bullocks himself on occasion, first-rate wrestler, good natured, seeks no quarrels but is never backward if one is forced on him. Firm but generous, I would give him my daughter if I had one." "Thank you," said the Assistant Collector "a very fine summing-up. You heard, lady? No, wait, don't speak yet. There may be another candidate." Cried the Naik, "Hurry up, gentlemen. This is no time for bashfulness. He who will not when he may/when he will he shall have nay." Said a five-foot two man, very solidly-built and an obvious personality with his tufted eyebrows, stern face and clipped moustaches, "If the second lady will excuse my lack of height, I should like to offer for her. I admire her spirit and think it would suit mine. I am forty and have never been married, for I thought I could not abide a woman around me, but she I think I could abide. I have some land. What kind of a husband I would make, I know not, for I have never been one. But she likes taking a chance I think, and so here I am." The woman, who had been looking at him off and on all the time, said straightaway, "Sir, I am honoured by your offer and accept it. Nay, I do not want to wait to hear anything to your disadvantage. My mind is made up." "God bless you both," said the Assistant Collector, as the man moved up and stood beside the lady. After a short silence, the first lady said, "Lord, I think I am well satisfied with the gentleman who offered for me." "Good luck to all of you, then" said the Assistant Collector. And to the Naik's second assistant, "Sanobar, here is twenty-five rupees. Ride with the two couples to the nearest kazi, have the weddings performed and entered in his register, distribute sweets, then return and report, leaving them to celebrate at leisure." "Lord," said the first lady, "from the bottom of our hearts we thank you. You have raised us from despair to happiness." And the second "Bless you, lord." "Go, go now, get married and I hope you will be able to say the same a year hence" said the Assistant Collector, and to the two men "Forget not, Sirs, these are our wards. They will make good wives, be you good husbands too, or you will see us beside them."

The five departed, bowing low again and again, and the Assistant Collector's gaze turning from them, fell upon the fashionably-dressed brothel-keeper, who stood with a sneering smile upon his face. "Ah, yes," said the Assistant Collector, "and now you. Shall I bind you down to keep the peace and refrain from rascally behaviour for six months,

refusing sureties and keeping you in jail, or would you prefer to fight?" "But I have done nothing, I have committed no offence, I shall send for my lawyer, I shall fight to the High Court, I shall—" expostulated the man. "You have done nothing, of course, only misled three unfortunate women into accompanying you, whom but for the grace of God, you would have led right into Hell, making quite a handsome thing out of it for yourself. I am kind to you, oh leper. I am generous to you in offering you a choice. What you deserve is that I should toss you to that crowd and let them tear your limb from limb and feed you to the dogs. Come, I have no wish to degrade myself by arguing with you. Go to jail or fight. Which?" said the Assistant Collector. "I'll fight of course," said the young man. "It is good to see you have courage," said the Assistant Collector. "Well what is your weapon? If it is the axe, or axe and dagger, Mohamed Khan will no doubt be delighted to send you to hell; if it is the iron-ringed staff, your humble servant will be pleased to oblige; if it is the long or short-stick, Anwar here will with pleasure beat you to a pulp. Choose." "I have an aversion to taking life, so the short-stick for me," said the young man. "Besides I am quite a champion with it. Don't be surprised if your man flees the field before I've done with him." "Right, the short-stick it is, clear the square, begin in three minutes," said the Assistant Collector. Within a minute and a half Anwar Khan was ready, head and chest bare, feet naked, a five-foot long resilient bamboo in his hand. He swished it round and turned to the Assistant Collector who said, "Don't kill him. No strokes on the vital spots, temples, etc. but beat him up properly and thoroughly. Let him groan with pain every time he moves a muscle for the next six weeks. I don't need to tell you any more. The scoundrel seems to have got away with everything in that damned corrupt city of his, and we must so deal with him that the very idea of coming North will send him into a raging nightmare. He may be good. Watch carefully for the first few minutes. When you've got his measure, hit, hit, and hit again. Good Luck." The young man stripped cleanly and displayed quite a turn of speed in addition to skill. In five minutes, however, Anwar had him breathing hard, then forced down his guard and rained blows upon him with such celerity that one could hardly see the stick falling. In ten minutes the fellow had lost touch completely, and Anwar drew back, but the Assistant Collector wouldn't let the fight end. He called for a three-minute break, let the man's servants refresh him with water and then

set the two to it again. Scientifically Anwar worked over the man from neck to ankle and back again until groaning and crying the man tumbled down in a heap. "Go now, oh brothel-keeper" said the Assistant Collector "and remember if you or your myrmidons ever come to these parts again, you will not escape so lightly." The man was carried off by his servants on a stretcher, and on that same stretcher that night they carried him to the nearest railway station to catch the train going South.

Still unfinished business, one petulant but now somewhat frightened female, reflected the Assistant Collector. A tall, thin man in a long black coat and with a black cap on his head, bowed before him and said in a low voice, "I am the physician whose wife has filed a petition before you that she is leaving me of her own free will. I was away when she left home, and following her, have just come up to learn that you saved her from certain destruction. I am greatly your debtor, lord–" "This is a bad business, Hakim Sahib. According to the lady, you have no time for her, her youth is being wasted, and so, as one lives but once, she wants to leave you and start again elsewhere. What think you of it?" "It is as I expected. I married this woman, lord, not just because I wanted a wife, but because she would provide me with an interesting subject for study. The moment I saw her I knew she lived in two worlds. I thought if she was left with her brother, a good, solid character, utterly disgusted with her strange whims, she might lose completely the balance of her mind. The first year she was completely normal, her daughter was born, she was a careful mother, I hoped all would go well. Then, she began to be moody. I watched, and waited. I tried to influence her, I was as kind as I could be, but I saw it wasn't beating her. She was convinced that any husband really fond of his wife, if he found her as neglectful of her household as she was, would beat her mercilessly. So I couldn't be fond of her. Now, I admit it is just not possible for me to beat anyone, even a child. My business is to save, not to kill; to cure, not to hurt. Hence this escapade." "What do we do then?" asked the Assistant Collector. "If you are satisfied that she really wants to go, why bother about petitions?" asked the Hakim. "I am quite ready to divorce her, peace be with her, and send her back to her brother." "Well," said the Assistant Collector, "let us hear the lady in your presence."

On being called, the young woman walked up, gave a quick glance at her husband, then averted her gaze and stood silent. "Here is your husband come to take you home. Now I take it you will go with him," said the Assistant Collector. "No, no, lord, not with him. He is inadequate, I tell you, he is too old for me. Let me go. I will find my way to my cousin who lives a hundred miles from here. She will look after me." "Look, woman, you have a little daughter of one, has she no claim upon you? Tell me, if your husband were not what you call inadequate, you would not want to part from him?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, lord, of course not, why I'm very fond of him and also, of my child," said the woman. "But I can't just bear this weakness of his." "Hakim Sahib, to my inexperienced mind, the solution seems simple. All that is necessary is to convince the lady, you are not inadequate. I take it in no sense are you that," said the Assistant Collector. "Of course not, Sir," said the doctor smiling. "Well, now, there is little garden pavilion quite empty but nicely carpeted two fields away. Why don't both of you ride down to it and talk things over?" "No, lord, no, I won't go with him, I won't go with this bloodless person. He is so inadequate," said the woman. Said the Assistant Collector, "While one may very legitimately have a strong prejudice against beating one's wife, Hakim Sahib, surely one can have none against picking her up gently and tenderly, putting her up on a horse before one and riding off to this pleasure-pavilion for a chat." "No, lord, no" cried the lady, while the Hakim, suddenly inspired, pounced upon her, and before she knew what was happening, was carrying her off, all her protests dying away in her astonishment. "He's dumped her on his horse, jumped up behind, and is galloping away," reported the Naik, trying hard to look serious. "Thanks be to God," said the Assistant Collector, "Well, that finishes petitions for the day. Tea, now, please, Dhanji, tea, lots of tea, I am dry from all this talking." Three quarters of an hour later, when the Assistant Collector sat dealing with files, while waiting for Alfresun, the physician and his wife were ushered in. The woman's face was radiant and she immediately burst out with "Lord, I am a fool. I came to apologise. My husband and I are both very deeply obliged to you." The Hakim just smiled. "Good luck go with you both and Hakim Sahib, you no doubt know the Saint-Poet's lines," and the Assistant Collector raised his voice in song.

"*To be rough, to be kind,*
To be bland, to be unkind,
All Roughness is not cruelty
Much Roughness can be love,
Love, love then, bold lover
Be tender and be rough.
The mood of the moment by no principle is bound,
Whatever is called for, let that quickly be found."

## IX

A few minutes later, a very dejected-looking Alfresun entered the Assistant Collector's tent. "Is all well, chief ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "The world seems to weigh very heavily upon you this evening." "I like not this going away at this time, lord," said the young man. "*In truth as she and I talked about it after you had left,* our spirits grew so low we could hardly look at one another. It seemed as if the end had come even as we had just begun to know one another. 'You must not go,' she whispered, clasping my hand. 'Yes,' said I 'but I promised. so ...?' 'Go, say we cannot part, that is all,' urged she 'I shall await you here tomorrow,' And so we separated, I to think and think and think and think until I realised it was time to come here. Lord, tell me I need not go, I beseech you."

Long and seriously the Assistant Collector looked at the young man, then said, "Assuredly, we shall talk about that. But first, let *us see what Pribhdasji has done about the letter to T.*" *The Sheristedar* came in and laying the letter upon the table in front of the Assistant Collector, unrolled the original manuscript so that the writing could be compared. "Well done, Pribhdasji, you have indeed excelled yourself. T. will, I am sure, be delighted with your calligraphic skill, and the style of your writing certainly befits the script. I am most

thankful to you, and so I am sure is the young chief here on whose behalf you have exerted yourself to such good effect. Is that not so, Sir ?" said the Assistant Collector, handing the letter to the young man who took it reluctantly, scarcely glanced at it, said yes, it was very fine, but 'lord, my request,' he urged.

"You have known both our Sheristedar Sahib and our Sardar Naik from childhood, I believe" said the Assistant Collector, "and the latter I think is a distant connection of yours. Let us hear them both on your anxiety to stay here, shall we ?" And having called in the Naik, he said, "Mohamed Khan and Pribhdasji, the young chief feels his place is here at the present time, he does not wish to go to the headquarters city. His dear friend desires his presence, his own heart speaks in agreement. What would you say to him ?" The Naik looked at the young man, as if amazed, then said, "I see you on your bier, young Sir, if you are foolish now. Do you realise the strength of the family from which you would snatch this pearl ? It can raise a thousand men in two days' time, let me tell you, if you do not know. By the special grace of God, the lord here has taken a hand in your matter; that in itself is equal to seven hundred and fifty men. But if you hamstring him in his efforts on your behalf, if one word of your secret meetings reaches the father's or family's ears before he has done his part, I would not give a copper coin for your life. To love ardently is natural, and it has been well said that to love and to be wise is given only to the saints. That is why the lord is anxious to get you out of the way. One false step and not only are all your plans finished, young man, but the whole countryside will be up in flames, your ancient kot burnt, your people killed, you a corpse or at best, a fugitive. And, remember, your lady-love will be married off at once to the first eligible or even not-so-eligible suitor. Better that than disgrace, they will say. For your good I speak. Hearken or suffer."

Said the Sheristedar, "Truly I am surprised at you, young man. Do you not even have sufficient understanding to appreciate what a burden we—saving your presence, lord, I say we—have taken upon ourselves out of sheer goodwill towards you and your beloved and also from the desire to prevent much strife in our territory. You, a comparative beggar, we are undertaking to try and get accepted for the only daughter of one of the greatest houses of the land, beauti-

ful, accomplished, in every respect (except perhaps in temper, from what the lord told us) a jewel of the finest water. Saving your presence again, lord, I think we have been rash in undertaking this, but we have undertaken it, and by dint of our efforts, God willing, we shall try and succeed. And here you come, pale, care-worn, sighing, and instead of doing all you can to help, handicap us by your I wills and I won'ts and I beseech yous. Enough of your folly; too much is at stake for it to be countenanced. You will catch the night-train to the city, you will remain on it till you get to the city, you will take our letter to the exalted T., you will await his reply, and you will not show your face in these parts for at least a week. Do you understand, and will you act accordingly? If not, lord, in all humility I suggest, Anwar, Sanobar and Nasir accompany the young chief and see that he complies. I shall with your permission draft a warrant for them to carry and use, should circumstances necessitate that."

"Well, now that you have heard what your sincere well-wishers think, what say you, Alfresun Khan? Should our men accompany you?" said the Assistant Collector. "No, lord," was the reply. "I agree that what has just been said by these friends is correct, and I must leave the matter in your hands. Only, my lady, you know, what .. ?" "Write her a letter sitting at that table there, and it will come to her hands secretly," said the Assistant Collector. "And in case you find your pen not flowing fluently, you may care to quote what a warrior-poet long ago wrote to the lady he loved and had to absent himself from for reasons of the public weal, 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more'. Is all agreed, then?" "Yes, lord, I catch the train to-night and no one shall see me back for at least seven days." Pribhdas thereupon rolled up the letter, enclosed it in a special hand-painted round envelope, and taking a handsome lacquer-work box put in the original manuscript below and his own letter on top. Handing it over to Alfresun, he said, "Please handle this carefully. No scratches, mind."

"Well, now," said the Assistant Collector, "we come to the next point. These two tell me it is basic that our mission of peace and joy should be led and all pourparlers conducted on our behalf by a lady of high degree. Is there any such of your kind who may be willing

to act for us?" "What they say is true, lord," said the chief, "but alas I can think of no one who would be willing." "But is it not correct that the most distinguished Zubeida Khanum, than whom none could be better for the purpose, is your grandfather's sister? Is there a breach between you?" "Yes, lord, I am afraid so. I do not think even now she would actively harm me, but I am certain she would not wish to assist me. It was thus, lord. Let me say at once that I owe her a very great deal. If when my father was in the grip of the devils of vice and low living she had not intervened vigorously and driven the evil out of him, – how it would not befit me to describe – I would not today have had even the modest competence I have. She taught me true skill with the weapons, especially the axe, my favourite. She, I think, was to me both mother and father. Yet, now, she is estranged from me. I am sincerely sorry, but I cannot think I was wrong. It happened thus. When I was about seventeen, she suggested a marriage for me, a distant cousin, very well-off in her own right, but as I knew from my childhood days, when the girl and I had played together she being two years younger, a sly, mean-spirited minx, never very careful about the truth. I said to the Lady Zubeida, 'Please No.' Why, she demanded. I told her, 'Look, you, boy,' she said, 'A woman whose faults her husband knows, is likely to make a far better wife than some stranger. The girl is of good blood, our own, none better. She is not ill-looking and has a frame fit to make a fruitful mother. She may be sly but she is also intelligent, and will not lie if she knows her husband is awake enough to catch her out. She has undisputed land and wealth, and with her by your side, you can rise again to the position your grandfather and father threw away. I have had soundings made, and she and her guardians would, I think, be willing. Shall we make the offer next week and follow up with the wedding, the week after?' 'Noblest of women,' I cried, 'No, please. I have no wish to wed save where I love.' 'Well,' she said, 'that is reasonable. Who do you love truly? Tell me and we shall see what can be done about that, though I shall be sorry to see you miss this valuable chance.' 'I love no one now,' said I, 'but who knows I may in future, and I would wait to marry till I do'. At this, her temper flashed forth like lightning. 'God in Heaven,' she said, 'have I nurtured a witless fool, utterly irresponsible, thinking only of himself? Do you owe nothing to your people, your line? You are now at man's estate. You have no brother, you are alone. You have

fights on your hands daily. God forbid I should wish you reluctant to fight, but where there is fighting there is often death, and if you *die without a son, with you* our house dies. Is that what I brought you up for and saved what I could of your land? If there is no one you love, there is no reason why you should not marry my choice. *What say you?*' *'Dear, dear lady,' said I, 'you are right, but I can*not, I just cannot.' For a week she tried to soften me; it must have been a week of anguish to her, for she truly proud has never *asked anyone to do anything for her, but I remained adamant. At* last, her patience broke. 'Well,' she said, looked at me calmly but arrogantly one morning, 'you know better. I will say no more and *you will see me no more. Do not trouble to visit me at my place* or to enquire about my health. You or any messenger of yours will not be received. Go your ways in peace, oh wise young man. You *were very much to me; you are nothing to me.' And without another* look at me, she strode right out, jumped on her horse and rode away, her personal attendants following. Since then, she has kept her word. *I* am in truth nothing to *her, and for the last two years, I* too have given up trying to be friendly, though before that I made many attempts to get her to change her mind, sending messages through old servants, trying to meet her, etc. *So you see, lord, if* we have to rely on her assistance, my position is desperate."

"Well then," said the Assistant Collector, "is there no other lady related to you or friendly to your family who could be asked to undertake this?" "No, lord," said the young man, "I am afraid not. My grandfather and father alas, by their conduct estranged all our friends of any dignity, and female relations other than *the Khanum I have none.*" "In God alone is our refuge," exclaimed the Assistant Collector, "truly this promises to be a most difficult business. You are right, Sheristedar Sahib, perhaps we have been *rash, taken on more than we can chew. Well Mohamed Khan, what* think you?" "I can but echo you, Sir" said the Naik, "In His Mercy alone is our refuge." "There must be a way," said the Assistant Collector, "And where thus must be a way, there is generally a way for the straightforward forthright man. Look you, disregarding all traditions and probable consequences, I will ride tomorrow by myself to the lady Roumela's house and after some talk with her father, made the offer straight out. I shall vouch for this young man's honesty, proficiency with weapons, courage, industry, practical ability in

and knowledge of agriculture. I shall praise his ancestry and sing the saint-poet's panegyric on the first Alfresun. If necessary, I shall remind him of the antiquity of my protege's house and compare it with that of his own to his disadvantage. Yes, that's it, the high line, that's the one to take. I shall congratulate him on his good fortune in having an offer from this paragon of virtue and worth, infinitely to be preferred in every way to the mere possessor of worldly wealth in land and gold. Well ?" All the three had been listening aghast. Pribhdas, the first to shake off the shock took off the black cap he usually wore on his head and bending down put it at the Assistant Collector's feet. "Sir," he said, "you can have my head, but this you will not do. Not while I live will I let you knowingly go to be murdered." Said the Naik, "Having a little property to leave and desiring no disputes later, I shall write my will tonight, lord, for clearly when you have this talk I must be with you, and we shall both be dead by 10 at the latest, presuming we read there at 9.15 in the morning. Three-quarters of an hour will be ample for your conversation with the lady's father, and the fight that will follow. It will be a good battle undoubtedly, you and I, back to back, you with your lorh and I with my axe, and twenty men swarming up on us. Yes, we shall send a few to Heaven or Hell, depending on their deeds, before we follow them to one or the other, depending on ours. As you will, lord, only the Sirkar one very precious, and one not altogether useless, servant." "Lord," said the young chief, "rather than that you should thus die on my account, for killed you will be assuredly if do this, I resign all pretensions to the Lady Roumela's hand. I promise you I shall not later elope with her and set the countryside ablaze. You need have no fear, lord, I shall keep my word. I am sure she too would say the same if she knew. No, lord, this you must just not do." The Assistant Collector looked at all three for quite a while saying nothing. At last, he said, "The grace of God is upon us surely that we are blessed with such noble companions. Nay, Alfresun Khan, you shall not give up your suit. Be sure not in this way will it be pressed, for we want it to succeed, not fail. Go in peace to your train and with a mind unharried by anxiety. Some solution we shall find, though what, I cannot think of now, much less describe. Has it not been said that the sincere searcher shall find, and shall find when he least thinks he will ? God protect you, and success attend you in the affair that takes you to the city."

*As the young chief left and the Naik and Sheristedar withdrew* Dhanji entered, a tall glass on the tray he was carrying. "Ah," cried the Assistant Collector taking the glass and raising it on high. "To Inspiration I drink, Divine Inspiration that illumines on occasion even the dull-witted such as I." He then took a long sip and carrying the glass, relaxed in his long canvas-chair, while Dhanji laid the table for dinner. Vague notions floated in his mind all through the meal so that he hardly noticed what he was eating. When, however, dinner being over, coffee and the usual tiny glass of liquor were set before him, his mind was made up. Quietly he said to Dhanji "Call in Pribhdasji and Mohamed Khan and stay here yourself while we talk." Ten minutes later both came in. Said the Assistant Collector, "It seems to me we gave up hope of Zubeida Khanum too soon. How far away from here is her place?" "10 miles to the north," answered the Naik. "Well, then, Sheristedar Sahib, kindly write her in your best hand and most polite style an invitation to visit us as soon as her convenience will allow since in a matter of great importance before us we feel sure her wise counsel will be of the greatest benefit to us. This letter early tomorrow morning, Mohamed Khan, you had better carry to her. Dhanji will accompany you, in his snowiest achkan and most fashionably tied turban, with the service colour cummerbund and turban-stripe. You are always debonair but if I may suggest it, wearing all your medal ribands will give your personality an even more distinguished look than usual. Dhanji will carry as a present that Fortnum & Mason box of candied fruit sent to us recently by my good friend in London. Yes, I know it's a great loss, Dhanji, you were counting on doling it out as dessert for at least the next month. But you see it is necessary to get the lady here in the first place, and the two of you together are bound to impress her favourably. Besides Dhanji's presence will make her feel it's not all official. If she agrees to come tomorrow, ride back with her; if later, return and let me know what the omens are. Well, what do you think, Mohamed Khan and you Pribhdasji ?" "A very good plan, Sir," said the Naik. "I think she will come. Her interest is bound to be aroused and we, of course, will know nothing about why you have invited her." "I agree," said the Sheristedar. "And once she is here, who knows her love for her greatnephew may revive." "Well, then, it only remains for all of us to thank God for His many mercies and for me to thank you for coming in so quickly at a time when I should not have disturbed you at all after your long day. Goodnight and God protect

you." Dharji lingered a little and said, "But Sir, what about you tomorrow ? Who will attend to you ?" "Don't worry, Dhanji, I'll manage, naturally not so well as when you are here, but it will be all right. Good night now and don't wait to bring me tea in the morning. Start off early so that if possible you can get back by tea-time with the noble lady. God be with you." The Assistant Collector moved to the tent door and stood looking at the bright stars. What a day it had been, a true day full of challenges, challenges reasonably well met he hoped. Well, the day was over. Praise be to God for it and for such other days to come as might bring their own challenges. And so to bed and to deep sleep within two minutes of his head touching the pillow.

## X

A quarter to five next evening found the Assistant Collector confronted with the last of the petitioners for that day, two sturdy young men who stepped forward and bowed. "Lord," said one, "he is the elder and will speak." "He and I, lord," said the other "are first cousins. Our family is noted for the horses we breed, and he and I are both excellent practitioners. The question now between us is, which is the better of two first quality stallions, one of which has been bred by him and one by me. They both had the same famous sire, and the dams too came from very well-known strains. We could not decide, and the experts in our locality were not unanimous, some favouring his, some mine. We were on the point of settling the dispute by fighting it out with axe and dagger, when an elder said your camp was only five miles away and surely no one could refuse to abide by your arbitrament. So, lord, decide; see, our grooms bring forward the steeds; the gray is mine, the black his." "It rejoices the heart to look at them both," said the Assistant Collector, "but friends, I confess freely I am no expert at horse-flesh. There must be many a judge more competent than I. Why not pick on one of them, if indeed it is important for you to come to

a decision on this point ?" "Important it is, lord, so important that if you will not decide, we must fight it out to the death," said the younger. "*Look you,*" *said the Assistant Collector,* "*this is the second time* there has been mention in my presence of fighting. If there is, and one dies, I shall hang the survivor. If both are wounded, I shall keep both in jail for five years after the wounds are healed. This is not *just a matter between you two; the Sirkar's peace is also a party* and here stand I to see it is respected. It is not necessary to remind you, I trust, that what is said here does not end with words; as it is said, so is it done. Now, what about X from the village 7 miles *away ? Is not everyone here agreed as to his knowledge of horses ?* Yes ? Well, then, let him decide. If you like, I shall send for him to come tomorrow." "No, lord, no," said the elder, and stopped short, as a cavalcade led by a tall rider in white came at a canter *to the camping-ground entrance. It checked* there, but the *leader* rode straight on to within six feet of the tent-door where the Assistant Collector sat, then jumped off, saying to her superb charger 'Stand'.

A murmur arose from the crowd "Zubeida Khanum, the noble lady Zubeida" as she took two paces forward and said in a deep, sonorous voice, "You sent for me ? But you seem to be engaged, *so..*" *Rising from his chair, the Assistant Collector bowed and said,* "You are very welcome, lady. Please be seated. In a few minutes we shall have finished." The lady took the chair brought forward for her, and looked round. The Assistant Collector turned to the two *petitioners,* "*You were saying ?*" "*Yes, Sir,*" *said the elder,* "X will not do, his daughter is married to my brother." "Well, then who ? Make up your minds. Wait, an idea strikes me. Our distinguished visitor here knows more, I have heard, about horses, than *anyone else in the province. I am content to accept her decision* and make it my own, if she will be so good as to oblige. What say you ?" "Aye, lord," said both, "let the noble lady decide." The Assistant Collector turned to Zubeida Khanum and explained briefly. *The lady nodded and said to the grooms,* "Walk the gray past me, and then the black." When they had done so, she rose, said "Let them loose," mounted with one quick jump the black, caught the reins of the gray in her left hand and riding out to the meadow behind the camping-ground, put both through their paces. Five minutes later, she rode back, jumped off the gray's back, and handing

the reins of both to the grooms, took her chair and said, "Good steeds, neither in the superb class. I would put both in the first class with three stars. No one need be ashamed of riding either. For war, the black would perhaps be a shade better, he can be fierce; for carrying a lady who can ride well on a long journey, the gray, he has an easier movement and would be just a trifle steadier on a rough road. I would pay exactly the same price for both. Do you want to sell ?" "No, noble lady, no," said the younger petitioner. "We just wanted it settled which was better." "Well, they are equally good. And remember, for the trouble that has been taken, the offer for a price of the first foal sired by each of these on any mare of yours must be made to me. Do you agree ?" "Yes, certainly, lady," said both, and turning to the Assistant Collector, they thanked him profusely.

Ushering Zubeida Khanum into the tent, the Assistant Collector expressed his gratefulness to her for readily agreeing to arbitrate on the dispute, which left unresolved, might well have ended in a man's death. Coldly she listened, then sitting down in the chair he set for her at his office-table, said, "Young Sir, you did not send for me to judge horses. Tell me why you wanted me here. I care not for smooth words, so to the point, if you please." The Assistant Collector studied for a few moments the formidable woman before him; he noted the straight figure, six-foot two at least, the noble forehead, the determined jaw, the hawk-like nose, the penetrating arrogant eyes, the magnificent bone-formation of the face, the firm long-fingered hands, the grave dignity of bearing, the total absence of any sign of strain or restlessness. He concluded that this was the authentic great lady; there would be no hesitations in her and she would miss nothing that was essential.

"You have a great-nephew, madam," he began. "Ah, yes, Alfresun Khan," she said, "Don't tell me that you have invited me here because of him. What has he been saying? That I won't see him or speak to him? Quite true. And, now are you trying to bring about good relations between me and him? If so, let me tell you that, whatever your place, such interference is simple impertinence, what my mother would have termed busy-bodiness, and there are few people more deserving of contempt, I hold, than being busy-bodies." All this was said with complete composure in a very mild tone of voice, and with

eyes fixed steadily on the Assistant Collector's face. Before the Assistant Collector could reply, Dhanji entered with a tray and moving to the visitor's side, said, "Tea or coffee, excellency?" Smiling at Dhanji, the lady said, "Welcome indeed would a cup of tea have been at this hour, good friend, but I do not know how we stand, the lord here and I, and I would not break any man's bread or sip his drink before I know that. Thank you very much, all the same." Amazed at the transformation the smile brought to the face, the change from a grave, austere person to a cheerful, kindly almost gay individual, the Assistant Collector hardly noticed that Dhanji had brought round the tray to him. Then, slowly, he said, "Thank you, but none for me today, it seems. If the lady will not, I too must sacrifice my usual cup."

As Dhanji left, he said, "I care not how much you have quarrelled with Alfresun Khan, lady. I am proposing to get him married and you are the fittest person to make the offer on my behalf. That is why I have invited you here. I seek your co-operation to get your great-nephew settled in life, to get your father's line established safely in the years to come." "Well, all I can say is you astound me. Here are you, an unmarried man yourself, and a stranger in our land, wanting to make an offer of marriage to whom, I do not know, on behalf of my nephew, and I am to serve as your catspaw! Look, tell me straightaway, why are you so concerned for Alfresun Khan or is it for the girl you are so concerned? In any case, who are you to be so concerned?" asked the lady, some animation appearing in her voice now. "To answer your second question first, I am concerned because it is my duty to be concerned. I do not want a bloodshed, which might well happen otherwise, so the offer must be made. Shortly, the desire to preserve order and prevent crime compel me to the course I am adopting. Alfresun Khan is a worthy young man, the best agriculturist, the finest fighter, in my territory. I know of nothing to his discredit. Roumela is one of the best specimens of womanhood I have seen. They want to get married and they were proposing to elope. I stopped that because of what would inevitably follow, the burnings, the killings, the upsetting of the whole country side. As to my being unmarried, that has nothing to do with the business. This is a completely impersonal matter. It is not the man acting, it is the servant of the laws, I hope you see," said the Assistant Collector. "Aye, I see," said Zubeida Khanum, her voice

hard, "and I see perhaps more than you think or wish I should see. Perhaps your interest in Roumela (which Roumela, I know not), oh young man without a fie, is not altogether so impersonal, perhaps you have known her for quite a time before the thought of arranging this marriage came to you, perhaps it became necessary for you to arrange to get her married. Well, what do you say?"

The Assistant Collector's face had become stone as this tirade proceeded. It was a strange trait of his, this of becoming completely detached it seemed, of losing all interest in things or people present. In a flat, even voice he said, "The insinuation you make is totally untrue, I believe you also know that it is totally untrue. Wholly unworthy of you it certainly is to make it, you must be aware. Were you a man, I would give you an hour to prepare yourself, then follow and fall upon you, nor would I be sorry as my lorh caught you on the temple and hurled you into eternal silence. You are, however, a woman, and as such, safe from me. It was a mistake to expect co-operation from you. Well, what are you waiting for? Go. You have our permission to depart." Enraged beyond all bearing, Zubeida Khanum sprang up from her chair, at the same time drawing the short sword she wore below her outer robe. In a strangled voice she said, "Woman, you say, aye, a woman who has killed many a better man than you. You would give me an hour, you would follow me and fall upon me if I were not a woman. Well, we need not wait. Get up from that chair and defend yourself, or I shall drive this through your heart as you sit." Said the Assistant Collector keeping his voice steady and leaning back in his chair, "Despite your magnificent personality, noble presence and true greatness, you are still one of those of whom the saint-poet said, 'To be angry and to retain sense, is that given to a woman?' Think, just think a little. You have killed me, I am dead. But is the Sirkar dead? And when they lead you to the gallows with a noose around your neck on a hot summer morning in the walled jail at the divisional headquarters, will the thought that you have killed me and I am dead still appear satisfying to you? Therefore, enough of anger. Put away your sword and go your ways in peace. I confess I am sorry our encounter has proved so saddening. Do not be too angry if you ever think of me, Zoe Banoo."

As the name at the end fell on her ears, a tremor shook Zubeida Khanum. The sword dropped from her hand. For a moment or two she stood trembling, then seized the edge of the table and hung on to it. All the blood seemed to have fled from her face, and she became very pale, like a person on the point of a fatal collapse. "Dhanji, Mohamed Khan," cried the Assistant Collector, rushing round to her. Holding both her arms, he led her to his long canvas-chair and slowly let her down in it, making without realising it, the sort of comforting noises one makes to a sick child. She lay there, seeming hardly conscious, as Dhanji held to her lips a small glass of cognac and made her sip the strong liquid. When, after swallowing about half the glass, she sat up and spluttering said, "What are you trying to do, make me drunk ? Come, enough of that, let me sit in the other chair near the table." The Assistant Collector looked with great relief at Mohamed Khan and from both burst forth a heartfelt "Praise be to God." Walking briskly over to the chair at the table where she had been sitting, the lady said, "Now, then, no urging to rest and sending for physicians for me! I was just upset for a moment. You two," looking at Dhanji and the Naik, "had better go about your business instead of fussing around an old woman, and let me continue my talk with this very unexpected man under whom you serve. Yes, bring that half-full glass to me, Dhanji. Cognac is not a thing to waste. And I shall be grateful for some tea for myself and my host here in fifteen minutes."

As the Naik and Dhanji went out of the tent, Zubeida Khanum leant across the table and said to the Assistant Collector, "What was the name by which you called me just before I collapsed ?" "Name," said the Assistant Collector, recollecting, "name, why, of course, Zoe Banoo." "And who told you that was my name ?" she asked. "Nobody told me. I'd never heard of it for you, I'm sure. No I just said it. It seemed to fit somehow. Zoe Banoo, Zoe Banoo, yes, it fits you," said the Assistant Collector. "You know, when I was a little boy my father gave me a book full of pictures of great personages and there was one of an empress, Zenoba, and she looked rather like you, tall and noble and graceful and brave and at the same time, gay and kindly and witty and faithful. My father said in Iran she had been called Zoe Banoo. Yes, that's it. We're old friends really, Zoe Banoo. I've known you for more

than twenty–three years." "Do you know who called me by that name before you ?" asked the lady. "My only son, he whom I lost when he was thirteen. Had he lived, he would have been about five years older than you. Yes, and he had the air you have, that way of holding the head and looking at people that makes everyone feel, 'Here's a rock to shelter in the shade of. He cares but little for himself.' And his hair was as full of curls yours is now, and when he was really angry, he would show his resentment by being entirely indifferent, you felt you weren't even in the same room with him, and that is just how you were when you told me, oh so steadily, 'you have our permission to depart'. Yes, you remind me greatly of him. I could not bear another child owing to a wound in battle, and though I urged my husband often to marry a second wife so that she could give him a son, he always took my hands in his and said 'Long life to you, dear wife. What need have I of aught when you are by my side ? My brother has many sons, the line is safe.' And you called me Zoe Banoo. Well, thank God you did, for you were nearer death that moment than ever you can have been. Tell me, did not fear just brush you even as you leant back in that chair and talked so calmly about the noose round my neck and the hanging to come in the hot summer morning ?" "Dear lady," said the Assistant Collector, "dear Zoe Banoo, I have known for many years that death comes when it will, that otherwise it will not, that when it is to come, nothing can avert it. What place then is there for fear ? And as to its being near, why twice yesterday, it was as near to me as it was today. Let me tell you about the first occasion. It will relieve your mind also about Roumela Banoo, regarding whom you seemed so suspicious." "God forgive me, I knew I was wrong even as I spoke. No, no, I never harboured any such suspicion, I assure you." "Good, I am glad, still hear the whole tale. It was thus.." "Ah, there is the tea, thank you, Dhanji, and what delicious things to eat. Yes, I am both thirsty and hungry. If you will put the tea–tray and the plates with the good things on the little table here, I shall look after myself and your master, too, never fear. Thank you again." Dhanji having left, she turned to the Assistant Collector with an eager, "Yes, go on."

The lamps were due to be lit by the time the Assistant Collector had related the whole tale from his finding of the ducks and meeting with Roumela to the sending of Alfresun to the provincial

capital. Zubeida Khanum had listened intently, exclaiming with surprise when she learnt who Roumela was and remarking she never knew Alfresun had it in him to aim so high. At the end she said, "You tell an honest tale most interestingly, Sir, my congratulations. Now, you will want to know, will I help? Well, before I make up my mind, I must tell you about Alfresun's grandfather and father and about things I had never thought to speak of to anyone. You see, I know this Roumela Banoo and I like her very much. I have watched her on horseback, with her knives and with the single-stick. I would not have her unhappy all her life with possibly a cruel and vicious husband. Better by far she would imagine her heart broken for a few months now. It's a very difficult business. My family-feeling, and though I detest Alfresun because he wouldn't accept my advice, I still have lots of family-feeling left, tells me it's an excellent thing for us, if the parents can be got to agree. At the same time the girl must not be doomed to misery. So, listen to my account and then tell me what you think." At which stage, Dhanji entered with the lamps, and bowing said, "Your ladyship's hot water is ready in the smaller tent and your servants attend you there. Dinner will be in forty minutes, unless you would like it later. Arrangements for your stay tonight have been made in the garden pavilion a quarter-of-a-mile away, your steward agreeing with the Naik that it would be inadvisable to ride on the ten miles to your cousin's at night. Besides which the conference here too seemed likely to go into tomorrow, the Naik thought." Zubeida Khanum burst out laughing. "Truly you have a marvellous household, lord. Well, good Dhanji, since everything has been arranged so neatly, it would not be fitting for me to raise objections. Lead me to the smaller tent and dinner in forty minutes by all means. Adieu, lord. Ah, you are astonished at my knowing that French word. Perhaps I shall tell you about my Marie Louise. She is in my tale too."

A couple of minutes later, the Naik and Sheristedar, coming quietly into the tent, found the Assistant Collector lying relaxed in his long canvas-chair. His eyes were closed, and they were just about to draw back when he said, "Well, good gentlemen, did you hear it all?" "Sir, I could not help it," said Pribhdasji. "When after her drawing her sword on you, the Naik sent word urgently, I dashed up as I was without even waiting to put on my coat, and since then have been sitting in the entrance curve with him, both of

us listening intently." "Well, I am sorry for you, it is pretty cold there. I suggest you give up the surveillance now. You must also have come to the conclusion I have, the danger-point is past. Whether the day decides to help or not is another matter, but nothing untoward is likely to happen now between us. Besides which, if she is going to reveal carefully-hidden family-secrets, it would be very unfair, don't you think, to have you two listening in, unless we told her you were so doing? So Pribhdasji, I think you can in good conscience, excuse yourself from sitting out in the cold, and Mohamed Khan, you need not appear, too, until it is time to escort her to the garden-pavilion. What do you say?" "That you are right, Sir, there is no doubt," said the Sheristedar. "I agree," said the Naik. "I am afraid the lady's decision will only come tomorrow, and since if she is to ride to her cousin's she must leave before lunch, perhaps you will not mind deferring tomorrow's field inspection to day after, and settling down from 8 to 12 to fix up this matter." "Let me see that diary. Yes, fortunately we have no engagements while out on inspection tomorrow," said the Assistant Collector, "so let the camel Jemadar and the village-officers know. And now tell me, what was your reception like yesterday morning at Zubeida Khanum's?"

"It is an old, gloomy house, Sir," said the Naik "and an hour passed before we were led into the lady's presence, but we were given excellent milk and **parathas** to refresh ourselves with while waiting. The Khanum sat at breakfast on a high dais, with several huge dogs around her; she is served with great ceremony, the silver dishes passing through at least three pairs of hands before the butler presents them to her. Dhanji and I both bowed low. She smiled and said, 'It does me good to see such well-turned-out men at this early hour. You bring a message, they tell me?' 'Yes, noble lady,' I said, and handed over to the butler your letter. She read it, then frowned, and turning sharply on Dhanji said, 'And who are you, Sir, and what brings you here?' Nothing daunted, Dhanji stepped two paces forward, made a low bow and said, 'I, madam, am his Honour the Assistant Collector's butler and I venture to submit for your gracious acceptance this gift that has reached him from foreign parts. He trusts it will please your ladyship and I am sure it will, for I have had the advantage of observing that your ladyship is a person of great discrimination.' And he held out on his open palms the beautiful hand-painted box we had taken. 'You are truly a courtier, friend

butler,' remarked the lady, taking the box and opening it. After a while she said, 'You are right, it pleases me, but I wonder, is it not dangerous to accept gifts from the Government?' 'Noble lady,' said I, 'it is not Government that sends you this gift. It does not belong to Government, it has not been paid for by Government. Our officer in his individual capacity received it from a friend abroad, and having heard much about your prowess in many fields, sends it as a small personal token of respect. You need not have the least objection to accepting it.' 'Yes, I think you are right,' *she said*, '*your honoured name and worthy residence?*' 'Your servant Mohamed Khan of village K, lady,' said I. 'Why, but then you are our kinsman. Was not your mother a third cousin? Yes, that's it. Well, I am glad to see you. I hope both of you will stay to enjoy our hospitality for some days.' 'Madam,' said I, 'we are under strict injunction to return this afternoon.' 'Good, then,' said the lady, 'I was going to ride down to my cousin's in any case in a day or two and I might as well do it this afternoon, breaking journey and hearing what the Assistant Collector wants of me. I have heard many tales about him and his deeds. Tell me, do the bards speak truly?' 'You will see him soon, lady and judge for yourself,' I said and bowing we withdrew.

"During the ride she chatted pleasantly and didn't even try to find out why she had been asked to come here. Her riding is of course a poem. One looks at her continuously to watch the splendid single smooth movement of superb steed and worthy rider totally in harmony, welded into one. Her axe, which she twirls merrily around her head, I would find it difficult to wield, and with her bow and arrows she dropped two imperial sand-grouse I would have thought too high to aim at. When her head-cloth fell off as she galloped, her long white hair trailed behind her like a banner. As the wind freshened and we rode into it, she carolled bits of war-songs then said, calling to me, 'Isn't it splendid to ride on a day like this and feel everything fresh and new. Do you not enjoy it?' 'It is, lady,' I said. 'In your company it is truly splendid. You make me remember the best days of my careless youth.' '*Oh, I am an old woman, I know, and* I have many sorrows, as you know, but still a day like this I enjoy as I always did,' she said, 'Do you think that is wrong?' 'Those whom the good God loves, even when their hair is snow, their hearts

hold spring,' I sang. The lady and indeed all the company took up the saint-poet's song and we cantered to it almost upto the village." "Well done," said the Assistant Collector, "you and Dhanji did very well, as I expected. Well, now I'd better go into the side-room and make myself presentable for dinner. Thank you both very much."

## XI

Coming back into the main room of the tent ten minutes later, changed and refreshed, the Assistant Collector looked in wonder at the transformation Dhanji had wrought. His usual long single-piece folding camp dining table was not square, another piece having been added to it. The centre of its table-cloth of Irish linen was decorated with a fine design of local wild flowers, and around it were three uncommonly shaped silver sweet-dishes with chocolates, pistachios and thin slivers of halwa from Bombay. Three whorled wine-glasses of varying size stood beside each plate. The napkins of Irish linen had been given the shape of boats. "What is all this?" he demanded from Dhanji. "When we entertain Magnificence itself, we do our best, Sir. And to answer your next question, everything on the table is our own. I carry the linen, glasses, sweet-dishes, etc. for two or three people only you know, just in case something unexpected crops up. I like to be prepared. One thing I was wondering about, a couple of flowers for the noble lady's plate. I have been able to get only one, shall I place it there or not? Here it is" and he disclosed a perfect deep-crimson rose, on the point of blooming. "I paid a rupee for it, but am not quite sure if it is right. What do you think, Sir?" "Exactly right. I am sure her ladyship will be delighted," said the Assistant Collector. "What am I supposed to be delighted with?" asked a deep, melodious voice from the door and in came the lady, shimmering in dark-blue silk, with upon her head, a white silk covering. Dhanji bowed and presented the flower on a silver salver. "Wonderful," she said, "you must have guessed the colour I was going to wear. A man of much merit

indeed !" and she pinned the rose to the front of her robe. "Well," said she as they took their seats at the table, "you seem very thoughtful." "I have found an answer to the emphasis you kept putting on my single state," said the Assistant Collector. "Shall I tell you ?" and as she nodded, "Had Nature not destroyed the magnificent mould in which you were cast, in the years after your grace first gladdened the world, in me too there might have been seen an humble suitor." "Touche," she said, "you have well repaid my probing curiosity." And smiling, "I shall now be able to add in your popular image one new item. I shall say the ruler who watches over us and tries to keep us on the straight path, that true servant of the laws, he can even pay a compliment, though of course he takes a long, long time to think out one."

Both broke into laughter while Dhanji having served soup, poured sherry into the medium-sized glasses. "You do not mind," ventured the Assistant Collector. "No, not at all. I enjoy it. And I do not consider it sin to drink wine in moderation. Marie Louise made it quite clear to me some years ago; grape-juice cannot become sinful just because it gets fermented, she argued. And as Hafiz, I think, has it ! Into disrepute wine brings not men, rather it is men who sully the reputation of wine. Now, shall I tell you what I had to say ? No, I think not. This soup is excellent, and if what is to follow keeps to its promise, it would be offending Providence, the giver of all good things, to withdraw attention from its gifts by talking about the sad things I have to. Tell me, when was your last proper meal ?" "About 11.30 in the morning, immediately after return from inspection," answered the Assistant Collector. "A long time ago," said the lady "I shall not mind if you concentrate on your dinner. Talk only if you feel like it." "I drink," said the Assistant Collector raising his sherry glass "to a most gracious lady of great good sense." "And my toast is," said the lady in her turn, "to a man just, iron-willed, ruthless, yet considerate." Both drank. Following the soup came roast venison, piping hot with jacket potatoes and a salad of tomato, cucumber, apple and heart of lettuce with a special dressing that was Dhanji's pride. "But this is a feast," said Zubeida Khanum, "you do not serve your master such viands every night, do you ?" "No, lady, no. He feeds, as no doubt he will tell you, well enough, but this is exceptional, for the occasion," said Dhanji as he bowed himself out to

appear a moment later with red wine, which he served in the larger wine-glasses.

"Now," said the Assistant Collector, "don't tell me this also is from our stock." "No, lord," said Dhanji, "it is not. This bottle is from her ladyship. It is the produce of her own vineyard, three days' journey to the North, her steward tells me. He was very anxious about whether it would travel, but when I decanted it, it seemed to me unhurt." "You have a vineyard?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes, not a big one, but its black grapes are very full and well-flavoured, and when I took Marie Louise north, she thought what a pity it was to let them go waste, and showed the women there how to make wine. Since when, I have never lacked a glass with my dinner. Pray try it and tell me what you think of it." "An admirable table-wine, lady, quite acceptable anywhere, certainly," said the Assistant Collector, "I thank you very much for your generous gift," and the lady nodded, satisfied. "Meditation goes well with a dinner of this quality," remarked Zubeida Khanum as the plates were removed. "And the result?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Life's problems are many and severe but one must not let them overwhelm one. Consider them carefully, face the worst that can happen because of them, and they get reduced in size. You agree?" "The thought is put admirably," said the Assistant Collector, "but here is a non-problem." Dhanji dimmed the lights and a moment later appeared bearing a fall of fire, a small pum pudding held over from Christmas with flaming brandy all over it. "Do I eat fire, then" cried the Khanum joyously, as Dhanji, putting the dish on the table, filled her plate and then the Assistant Collector's, adding to both generous helpings of brandy-butter sauce. "This is truly wonderful. I have become a child, I am being given a treat." "That you should adorn this simple board, Zoe Banoo," said the Assistant Collector, "than this what treat could be greater for us?" After the pudding, came the coffee which both took black, with small glasses of the honey-wine of the north, each sip of which fills the mind and heart with the fragrance of the gardens in which the bees gathered the honey.

When the quite content that follows an excellent meal among people of discrimination and taste had lasted a full ten minutes, the lady stood up and said, "Now take your usual seat at the office-table,

and raise the wick of your table-lamp. I shall sit on the other side and tell you about my house under my brother and his son, my nephew. Then you will be able to see why perhaps it will be in the best interests of Roumela Banoo, and even perhaps of my great nephew, for you not to proceed further with this idea of marrying her to him. My own life, too, will come into the narrative a good deal, and that you must forgive, for I cannot exclude it if I am to give you the full picture. My father had two wives, my mother being the senior. When after six years of marriage, she was still childless, she insisted on my father marrying again and chose for him a very beautiful young cousin of hers. Within a year of the marriage my brother was born. Three years later, my mother bore me. My father was a grave, reserved seigneur, who seldom smiled. His alias, however, was Cheerful in Battle, for in a good fight, they said, he was most jovial, and his quips, as he mowed down the enemy, were often remembered and repeated. My brother indeed the whole household stood in awe of him, but in me he took a friendly interest ever since at the age of two and half, I clung to his axe-arm as he was practising in the courtyard and let myself be raised with the full sweep of the axe without uttering a cry and laughed aloud when tumbled on the ground, at the end of the stroke. Thereafter, he had me trained as if I were a boy and by the time I was twelve, I could beat with any weapon not only other young trainees of my own age, but old youths, including my 15-year-old brother. This drove him into a wild rage and it was then that I first got a glimpse of the viciousness deep down in his nature.

I had ridden out by myself to a hidden pool where I loved to bathe early in the morning. Coming out of the water, I could not find my clothes and while I stood looking for them shivering, my brother and two others of his own age, whom too I had beaten both at axe and sword-play, swooped upon me and seized me. They bent me down on a tree-stump, the two holding my arms and legs and my brother striking me savagely with a strap-leather across my seat. I struggled all I could but had been caught at a grave disadvantage and nothing availed me. "Cry," he said, "cry, why don't you cry? You're a girl, aren't you? Cry. Well, if you won't cry, I'll keep on till you do." Mad with rage and pain I was but no tears would come to my eyes; and so he showered blows upon me until I fainted. When I regained my senses, I found him watching me

with a strange expression of exultation and shame. He threw my clothes at me and said, " Had you not been my father's daughter, much worse would have been your fate. Keep quiet about this or we shall deal with you once and for all. And remember, no more flaunting around like a boy. You are a girl, learn girlish ploys and leave weapons alone." I lay there fainting and recovering for quite some time, then somehow huddled my clothes on and managed to make my way to my foster-mother's cottage. Her I swore to secrecy, and for nearly a fortnight she tended me, until I felt strong again. My mother who had been away on a visit was enquiring for me, she told me one day, and so plucking up courage, I returned home. Always I stayed in my mother's shadow, avoiding all contact with males, until one day my father demanded my presence.

" What is this," he said. " I see you no longer in the courtyard handling arms. Have you become just woman already? Come, let me see you ride at that peg." Vaulting into the saddle without aid of hand or stirrup, I took the lance a man-at-arms held out and by a combination of good luck and judgement, carried away the peg with the utmost aplomb. " Well done," said my father. " you have shown all these young men who failed at the test. how it should be done. And so Zubeida you shall be and ride by my side wherever we go." And he sent for a 'poshak' as we call a warrior's robes, mail and weapons and put them on me himself. Thereafter none dared molest me, and my brother and I fell into a kind of truce, which even ripened to friendship as my father led us into skirmishes with small bands of our enemies. Thus lived I with men even when womanhood had come upon me, except for the times between campaigns when my mother claimed me, to love me and make much of me, and teach me the arts of household management, and cooking and even, strange are the ways of mothers, sewing. Sixteen I was, and in woman's dress, according to my mother, a veritable princess, and she grieved that she was not allowed to arrange a fitting marriage for me, for my father termed me his second sword, and I even caught his way of laughing joyously as my axe severed a neck, cleanly carrying away the head. My brother too was brave, a good fighter and a better tactician than I, but for him a battle was always a task deadly serious. There was no zest, no spring in his fighting. Ever and always he seemed haunted by the thought of danger. Perhaps because of that, he reacted

mercilessly in the moment of victory, sparing neither the wounded nor those who surrendered, unless my father sternly commanded him to. It was this trait of his which led to our most serious clash.

Once, returning home from a raid, loaded with booty, we found a large body of the enemy had cut across country and were blocking our path home. There was nothing for it to fight our way through. As they moved in to attack, my father said to me, "Deal with that tall man in the middle and we may still manage." I went straight for him. It was a good fight that, almost as if we two were matched all by ourselves against one another. There was no room to swing an axe, so it was sword and dagger on both sides. Twice he got through my guard, but the agility of youth saved me. Then my opportunity came. In attempting a downward stroke, he exposed himself and in a trice my thrust went straight through his heart. "Good," he said "good," and fell, dragging my sword out of my hand. A shattering blow fell upon my head beating me to my knees. Then as my head tilted back, I was conscious only of two piercing grey eyes and an axe stopped suddenly in half-stroke. Struggling to my feet, I heard my father's voice and picking up an axe that lay by a fallen man rushed towards him for he was surrounded and was just managing to hold his own. As I came up, he lurched and went down. Standing *over him, a new strength* seemed to flow into my veins and a man fell at each blow of mine. Suddenly the piercing grey eyes held mine again, and my arm seemed to grow weak. But at this moment with a loud cry a fresh body of our men, led by my brother, joined the fray and the enemies' *defeat became certain.* A blow from behind struck grey eyes and he tumbled down at my feet. The fight was over and my brother in his usual blood-lust was dispatching every wounded man of the other side he could see. "Stop him, stop him," cried my father, wounded himself and I shouted to my *brother to stop, but* he only looked at me, laughed scornfully and seeing a movement on the part of grey eyes, rushed up his axe on high. "Hold," I cried, "will you fight me?" "Aye, by God, glad will I be to put an end to you, thorn that you have always been in my side," said he, springing forward. My axe, too, was at the ready and in a moment we would have been engaged, when suddenly, something struck him, just *in the middle* of his forehead and he fell on the spot. My father, spent as he was, had picked up a stone and aimed it right.

I took command then and had my brother carried away quickly before he recovered consciousness. I tended my father on one side and Grey Eyes on the other, and soon both were fit enough to be moved, so leaving my father's senior lieutenant to see to the burying of the dead and the bringing of the wounded, I hastened home with my two patients, hoping to get there before my brother, reporting my father dead, seized the place. Fortunately, he was still unconscious when we got there, and my mother looked after my father so well that he was soon able to come out into the courtyard leaning on her arm. Grey Eyes' case was worse and he sorely puzzled my mother by babbling in his delirium of the angel Gabriel with her flying hair and of how she looked at him with green-blue eyes. However, after three days of her ministration he came back to the world, and was carried into the courtyard to be confronted by my father and brother, who by now was quite himself, except that he disdained even to recognise me.

My father asked Grey Eyes his name and when he mentioned it, with a whoop my brother said, 'Execute him forthwith. He is the only son of the head of our principal enemy, who thanks be to the Almighty, was killed in the fight, and if we put an end to him, we shall have peace for 20 years at least.' My father said, 'Let me think, and for a few minutes silence prevailed. Then I spoke to my father 'Lord, who killed the enemy chief ?' 'Why, you did,' he answered. 'And, lord, who stood over you when you had been beaten down to the ground ?' 'Why, you did, my daughter, you saved my life,' was his reply. 'May I then,' said I, 'going down on my knees, crave a boon, lord ?' 'Do, child,' said he. 'Spare the prisoner's life' said I. 'Twice that day in the fight I was at his mercy and he spared me and passed by.' My father frowned, my brother argued at length about the impolicy of such a decision, my mother stared at me intently, Grey Eyes' face was pale and he looked very puzzled, and I was still on my knees in front of my father. With a sigh, he said at last, 'What your brother urges is true, but the man is weak and wounded and in a way our guest, and if he did spare you, he did me and all of us great service. So be it as you will. Sir, until you are quite well, consider yourself our honoured guest, and when you are quite well, we shall see you safely to your home.' Picking up his own axe, he limped over to Grey Eyes in his litter and laying it by his side, took his right hand in his own, and closed his fingers on

its handle. 'May you always be happy, most noble lord,' said I to my father. 'I shall indeed be eternally thankful to you.'

Then getting up and turning to Grey Eyes, who had been watching in wonderment,' I said, 'Oh man, whose name I have heard for the first time just now, whom I have called to myself upto now only Grey Eyes, if you will freely and of your own accord, in good faith and, above all, in love, marry me, I shall in love and honour marry you. In this, know there is neither compulsion nor levity. If you will not, freely say no. I shall not take it ill. I am aware that for a maiden, and I am still one, this behaviour is shameless. But though I am a maiden, I am also a warrior and I speak as befits one who had known and faced death to another who has known and faced death. I await your answer, now or whenever you see fit to make it.' As I got to the end, I was trembling and my voice quavered, but I stood my ground and looked straight into his eyes. Grey Eyes suddenly sat up in his litter, then cried out in a strong voice, ' God in Heaven, you are the angel Gabriel with your flying hair and green-blue eyes. Why, I have loved you from the moment our eyes crossed in the fight. Alas, you killed my father; how shall I explain our marriage to my people ? Still, I love you now and shall love you for ever. So, lady, your devoted and humble secure servitor begs the priceless boon of your hand in marriage.' All present were moved, except my brother whose face grew dark as thunder. My father nodded in approval and smiled. My mother stepped up to me and holding me by the arm led me to the litter, then taking my right hand, put it in that of Grey Eyes. Only my brother went off into a tirade, " So, not content with letting the enemy live, we are giving him a bride, a bride who can claim a share in our land, one who joining the enemy can expose our weaknesses and make plain our secret places. Was it for this that so many of our people have died for so many years and even so recently ? Good friends, can you let this be ?'

My father frowned and was about to speak, when I interrupted. ' I, lord, am quite prepared to sign any document that may be devised to say that I irrevocably on behalf of myself and my children give up any claim I may have to any kind or other property of yours. I seek nothing from this house, except goodwill. ' Said Grey Eyes, ' I, too, shall willingly sign a deed relinquishing any claim that may arise

to my wife or children. I shall further promise not to press or encourage any one else to press any such claim. I have already the most precious of your possessions. What want I with anything more ?' 'Enough,' said my father. 'Our man of business shall prepare the documents. To-morrow, before your marriage, you will sign them,' and turning to my brother, 'Well, that should satisfy you. Now let us have no more bickering.' So next day we were wed, and as soon as Grey Eyes was able to travel, left the house. I never saw it again until after my brother's death. I tried to visit him when my father died, and again when my mother passed away, but always there came a blunt refusal. He even returned the presents I sent on his marriage.

After my mother's death some years later, her personal maid came to me and said my mother had specially charged her to tell me that whatever his attitude, I must look after my brother. She feared for him. He was very extravagant. He had taken to gambling and was extremely cruel to his wife. He was getting rid fast of his land. I could not restrain him, no one could. So one day when he was visiting an old friend of our family, I managed to arrive there by accident. He was in a good mood to begin with and I had a long talk alone with him. When I charged him with his misdeeds, his neglect of his son, his gambling, his bad behaviour to his wife, his extravagance and mismanagement of his estate, he swore madly at me, saying it was no business of mine, and when I reminded him of our ancestors, of the first Alfresun and all our honourable and mighty forbears, his answer was, 'And you married our enemy.' I said, 'Look, I have had a very difficult time in my husband's domain living down the fact that I come from their enemies, but I have at last succeeded in making them believe that not only am I not their enemy, but that none of my people are. And hasn't that been good for you? Have you had our raiders in your territory at all these last few years ? Have we killed your people, carried off your women ? No, and this despite the fact that it is common knowledge that you have become quite incapable of protecting your own. You are even selling off ancestral land, letting it get into the hands of strangers, who make our people serfs. For God's sake, you were a soldier once, you could fight well enough, pull yourself together now. Think of our thousand-year traditions. Do you want our name to be lost in disgrace ?' 'It is easy to talk,' he said. 'What you say I sometimes think myself, but you know I will tell a secret. You remember the time when I beat you to a pulp with my stirrup-leather. Well, that is

what I want to do more and more. That alone gives me the satisfaction that makes life worth living now. And that has to be paid for. It is not easy to find people to beat up. Easy enough to kill, but I don't *want to kill, just to beat and beat until the blood flows and the cries* ring out, and the body grows limp and faint. And so, I've taken to opium. It fills the mind with fantasies. And in fantasies lies salvation. Why, I caught myself beating my poor wife the other day, and in horror fled the house.' 'Oh, brother,' I said, catching him up in my arms, 'you must fight this. Come and live with me for a few months. Bring your wife and son. For our father's sake, for my mother and your mother's sake, do this.' Like a child he wept in my arms, then suddenly turned hard and said, 'Go to you, the enemy! Never, never. You must go, what are you doing here, anyway? Go, go.' 'Look,' said I, 'if you won't come, send me at least your son who now is fit for schooling. Let me train him in the right way.' 'You,' he said, 'you *could not keep your own son alive. Now you want mine. Go, woman,* go.' At that I must confess I could stay there no longer.

With sorrow in my heart, I left him, and was so distrait for weeks on end that Grey Eyes got us involved in a quarrel, where we had to struggle for bare survival and could spare no time to think of anything but how to outwit the opponent. After months of severe fighting, peace was patched up, and I had time to think again of other things in the midst of getting over two severe wounds. Then I learnt that the old house where I live now, that came to the Alfresuns through my mother, my brother was getting rid of. Using an agent, Grey Eyes bought it for me. Scarcely had the transaction gone through when the news came that my brother, having had a stroke while out riding, was dead. I tried to pay a visit of mourning but was told he had left express instructions in his will that I was to be turned back and not allowed to enter. His son was not prepared to overrule his father's orders. He had in any case never seen me and had heard only ill of me.

## XII

"After my brother's death," resumed Zubeida Khanum with a sigh, "for many years I lost touch completely with my father's house. There are some men, as you know well, for whom life has little savour without challenge. My Grey Eyes found the complete peace he had established in his area tedious. His neighbours of other clans accepted his superiority without question, for not only was he a great warrior, he was also a most skilful general. He could not in good conscience attack them, and I was almost in despair about how to distract his mind from its continuous fretting at enforced idleness when one evening a distinguished cavalcade of about twenty rode up to the gate. 'We come in peace,' declared the magnificently clad noble who was obviously its chief, 'and would be grateful for a night's hospitality.' 'You are very welcome, Sir,' said Grey Eyes, 'but perhaps you would like to perform some small feat of arms for us to admire before the night comes. If so, I shall be honoured to assist you.' 'No, no,' cried the leader, laughing. 'I have heard too much about your prowess, oh chief, to want to test it. All we seek is lodging and food. If you will give it, you have our thanks. If not, we ride on.' At which Grey Eyes himself held his horse while he dismounted and then leading him in presented him to me. A handsome, merry-eyed man he was and spoke with great courtesy. As we sat after dinner, talking generally, suddenly he looked straight at Grey Eyes and said, 'Time, I understand, hangs heavy on your excellency's hands, owing to the unique state of order you have caused to prevail here. Perhaps then you would care to consider taking service for a term with my monarch, the great king of the North.' I put my hand on Grey Eyes' knee to restrain him. With difficulty holding himself in check, he said, 'There seem to be strange mocking voices in the air today. I thought I heard someone offer me service. But it cannot have been

so, for otherwise whoever said it would now be lying dead at my feet. Know, Sir noble, that I am the equal of any king. Neither I nor my people serve anyone, however great.'

'God in Heaven forgive my clumsiness,' said our visitor, 'what I meant was that perhaps you might ally yourself with the great king *and help him deal with the savage enemies from the North who be*came bolder every day. He has much need of friends like you on whom he could rely and would naturally see that you gained greatly by coming to his assistance. In fact I may say that the main purpose of my visit to these parts on my way to our embassy in the Hot Lands was to suggest to you this alliance. His Majesty himself mentioned your name, having heard of you as a general of great skill and spirit. You would be placed at the head of five thousand, so that only the Commander-in-Chief, the King's uncle, would be between you and the King. What say you, Sir? Plenty of work, plenty of adventure, scope equal to your greatness, could a noble fighter ask for more?'

Grey Eyes looked at the speaker gravely, then took my hand in his and said, 'I accept the alliance if a similar command is allotted to the noble lady Zubeida here, my equal in war, my superior in peace.' The light in my eyes as he said this, he told me later, caused his heart to leap so much that he almost caught me to himself in front of all the assemblage. The noble's face however became very serious and he said, 'A woman at the head of an army! No, Sir, that cannot be. I have of course heard of the exceptional qualities and qualifications of this great lady, but truly, Sir, it would not be possible.' 'Well,' said Grey Eyes, 'it gets rather cold at nights here. Steward, see that an extra rezai is laid conveniently at the foot of our guest's bed. You will no doubt wish to retire now in view of your tiring journey today and the bad conditions of your road to the south tomorrow. A very good-night to your honour. May the angels guard your slumbers.' I could see the diplomat struggling to speak, then suddenly he smiled, bowed low to Grey Eyes, bowed equally low not once but twice to me, and allowed himself to be escorted out of the hall. 'Well!' cried I, 'and now...' But Grey Eyes rose, put my hand on his arm and bowing to all present, took me off to our room. 'Now,' said he, 'talk away,' and all we could do was to burst

out laughing and fall into one another's arms. Next morning when I came down the diplomat and his people had departed. I thought the whole business was over but was glad to note it had left Grey Eyes more animated and content than he had been for quite some time.

A month later however came a special embassy with parchments of alliance, many rich presents and a request to those Rustoms-of-the-time, my husband and myself, to go at once to the capital and after presenting ourselves to His Majesty, proceed to our commands where we were badly needed. Grey Eyes had been given the very difficult Northern frontier, then under constant attack and I the easier and less extensive North-Eastern. Grey Eyes handed over acting authority to his brother, nominating his second son to take over from him in case of death or incapacitation (the first son having become a scholar and a sufi and desiring no contact with the world except a full plate of every meal), and asked for a six-monthly report to be sent to him regularly.

We said good-bye to our home with sorrow and yet with a great lifting of our hearts. For the first time almost since our births we owed no duty to anyone except our two selves. No one could place their troubles on our shoulders and we thoroughly enjoyed the month of holiday until we parted for our respective commands. That moment was perhaps the second most difficult of my life. Always since my marriage Grey Eyes and I had been together. Almost we were one person, and now suddenly with just a clasp of the hand and a cry of good fortune attend you, the commander of the North-East, attended by her staff, had to ride away smiling. The longing to look round, to cry damn all this play-acting I want to be with you, almost made a woman of me then. However I had worn the 'poshak' since the age of twelve and the axe at my side reminded me I had been a soldier longer than I had been a wife.

To tell of the years we spent there and of all that happened would need not just this night but a full fortnight of nights, nor would it be relevant to our purpose here. Perhaps some other time when you are on leave and can come and spend a month as our guest, I may tell you about that time. I know I would like to, you listen so attentively and your face shows you so sympathetic to the

ups and downs of the narration. For the present, suffice it to say that Grey Eyes pacified the Northern frontier so effectively, and I the North-Eastern, that all attacks ceased. Soon our areas were known as the most peaceful in the kingdom. Cultivation and cattle increased, instead of fighting we became immersed in underground water-channels, in tree-planting, in setting up new villages, in settling quarrels among immigrants from other parts of the country. 'God in Heaven,' cried my husband the first time I met him after the attacks had ceased—we used to try and get a few days together every quarter, if we could—'I am no general. I have become estate-steward to all the people of the whole command. Do you know they wanted me to tell them what to do with a six-fingered boy who had just been born. Should they keep him or expose him at night and let him die? I had him brought before me. A nice, healthy brat he was. Their objection was only to the sixth finger. Such children are unlucky. 'Oh fools,' I said, 'all children come from God, fear not what He sends; since the sixth finger worries you, hereafter he shall have only five.' With my dagger I cut off the sixth before both the child and they knew what was happening. They went away happy and here is the finger I kept to show you.' Yes, our areas flourished, our people were happy, our soldiers disciplined and satisfied. We paid them on time, so they did not loot the people, punished severely when we had to, so all were kept in awe. We were not servants of the laws, as you say you are (though how far you are not really their master, I shall not presume to judge): we were the laws.

The better we managed, the more the king's courtiers became jealous of us. They tried to embroil us with one another. I was constantly being told of Grey Eyes' beautiful mistresses, one especially a Circassian with the most attractive figure and such a marvellous singing voice, and he of the many young and handsome officers I was always closeted with at night. When they saw this was no use, for I just said and why not? Should so great a man have no pleasures at all? And he cut off the head of the most important messenger the intriguers had sent, they told the king the two of us were plotting against him. I learned of it first and warned Grey Eyes. This was after we had been there two and a half years.

Everything in our charges being quiet, and all arrangements having been made for emergencies, the two of us with three men each rode

down to the capital. Appearing at the morning durbar we took our place in the line of petitioners, dressed in our robes of office. The King saw us and demanded we come forward and tell him why we were there and not in our charges. 'Highness,' said Grey Eyes as if he was speaking to any important sirdar in his own land, 'we are your allies and as such we have fulfilled wholly the tasks you entrusted to us. Now we would go back to our own land. So give us leave. We can hand over here to whoever you direct.' 'Impossible, impossible,' said the King 'I will not have this. You are pledged for five years. You must stay.' 'We are pledged for five years and you are pledged to trust us and harbour no suspicion of us. Have you kept your part of the pledge, Sir, that you expect us to keep ours?' I demanded. 'How dare you speak to me, woman,' he cried out, 'Come, ally,' I said, 'A woman has kept your frontier when none of your men could. And if anyone thinks he can stop this woman having her say let him come and try,' and I swung aloft the axe that had been hidden by my robes and gave him the double-flourish salute. The King spoke to his principal minister, a crafty old man but likeable and on the whole concerned for the good of the land. 'Lady Zubeida,' he said, 'you are our ally and our friend and so is your husband. You are both Panjhazaris. You must agree that it is not fitting that people with your responsibilities should approach our exalted monarch in this manner. He is merciful and known that in your hearts you are sorry for your conduct. He therefore invites both of you to attend him at his first meal immediately after the durbar.' I looked at Grey Eyes. He nodded. The axe disappearing among my robes I made a very deep bow and said loudly the formula to hear is to obey.

At the lunch while the King ate we stood below the dais, but he argued with skill and animation. He was quite satisfied with us, what right had we to confront him like this. Grey Eyes asked quietly whether it was not true that the Chamberlain of the Household, present there, had told him we were preparing to march our troops on to the capital, whether he had not half-believed it, and whether there had not been an attempt to poison Grey Eyes' food. Why then should we stay? He had no doubt we had the strength to take the kingdom if we wanted to, also that many would flock to us, but we would not harm him. So we just wanted to go, taking with us only the savings from our earnings and nothing

more. The impact of his quiet speech was tremendous. The King burst into tears, then jumped down from the dais and embraced him, calling him brother. He forthwith dismissed in disgrace the Chamberlain and several other officers, and assured us he fully accepted what we said and would we please go back to our charges at once. The enemies' attacks would begin, he thought, the moment it was known we were absent. The old vizier escorted us out, then taking my hand said, 'I believe what he says, daughter, no harm will come from him to either of you. Go and do the good work you have begun so well, and I will send you both a letter every month, don't worry.' So we returned to our posts.

As time passed, much that had been new and challenging became routine and could be done by rule. We both had trained promising young men of intelligence and character and towards the end of the third year found we could leave much to them contenting ourselves with sudden surprise visits. Thus we were able to meet oftener and found life far more pleasant than it had been earlier. The vizier wrote seventeen letters to me—I have them still—full of worldly wisdom and valuable information. Then death took him and from Grey Eyes came the information that he had been summoned urgently to the capital, but there didn't seem to be any threat and I should remain at my post. I did and a week later he arrived to tell me the King had offered him the viziership and what did I think. I said no, he was not a man for the pen, and long hours of attendance at durbars and meetings, watching another far less competent than himself mess up things, would exasperate *him* beyond bearing. That more or less, he said, was what he had told the King. Also that he was a foreigner and the First Minister's post must obviously go to a native. Reluctantly, the King had agreed, asked him for suggestions and was appointing a good man he had named. He also told me then he was getting home-sick and would I mind if we left earlier than the five years. I said I would be only too happy for us to be together all the time.

A year later came some of the worst fighting of all that time, both for him and me. The enemy had been reinforced by tribes even more savage than themselves, horrid-looking short men on small ponies who would pour in and pour out destroying everything in *their way*. We had to adopt a totally new strategy to deal with

these locust-clouds which never seemed to stand. Several thousand Grey Eyes and I together hemmed in on one occasion. Then they stood and fought, fiercely and desperately, but unavailingly, and the fast-flowing river prevented their escape. The slaughter inflicted was so great that their power was broken and we lived thereafter comparatively at peace.

In the midst of the general rejoicing we petitioned the King to be allowed to return home. He agreed, amazed, for our prestige had grown greatly and he had even been urged by some to name Grey Eyes his successor instead of his own young son. Great gifts he bestowed upon us and we left three months before our period of five years had expired. Slowly we wandered back, no commanders of thousands now, but a simple caravan of ten riders with double that number of baggage camels. Time after time were we attacked by robber-bands but hard fighting kept us safe and nine of the ten finally reached Grey Eyes' home, to receive from his nephew an account of his stewardship, for his brother had been killed a year ago in a raid by a neighbouring tribe. Grey Eyes' absence had soon broken up the order our prowess had enforced. Well then there was work to be done at home, too, and Grey Eyes was content."

As the lady paused, her eyes and mind both in the past, the Assistant Collector touched the bell on his table. In a few moments Dhanji came in with two tall glasses. Tasting the hot decoction, the lady said, "but this is positively ambrosial. You are a great artist, Dhanji." "Your Excellency is too kind, it is but a simple mixture," said Dhanji, withdrawing. "Well, I have been too long with the past this evening, and again I shall have to plunge into it, so until we have sipped down this drink fit for the immortals, we shall stay in the present, shall we?" asked the lady. "Most certainly," said the Assistant Collector, and both relaxed in their chairs, silent in pleasant companionship. "Listening to an account like this creates tension in the listener too; doesn't it?" said the Khanum. "Aye, Zoe Banoo, one lives but to hear what follows, truly, the listener participates," said the Assistant Collector. "Only if he is truly sensitive. Fortunate the bard who has a sensitive listener, they say," added the lady.

Finishing her drink, she began again. "Packed with incident as was the period from our return till after Grey Eyes' death, it left me no time to inquire about my nephew's doings. I just heard

rumours that my nephew was a better person than his father, not enterprising but reasonably competent, and things were not going badly with him and his people. You have heard of how Grey Eyes died and I very nearly with him. The bards have made a great tale of it, mostly true. The centre of my life was snatched away from me and for months I felt powerless and without will. One morning however I got up with the thought he would not have wished me thus. So that day I told my nephews I would trouble them no longer with my sadness and by the afternoon had left with my own personal staff for the old family estate where I live now. Walking in its garden, riding round about it, my spirits revived. I began to take an interest in the affairs of the world and soon was physically and mentally as tough as ever. My skill in agriculture and my skill at arms returned together and some of the younger people, women and men alike, began to come to visit me, to acquire wisdom and poise, they said. One day we were practising with the sabre on horseback when my chief steward came into the courtyard and looked at me most urgently. Feeling he had something important to say in private, I dismounted and went into the house to be confronted by two old women and two old men who falling on their knees surrounded me saying 'You must do something, you must. You can't let your house disappear forever.'

Looking carefully at them I saw they were old servants of my father. Their names came to my lips again and making them comfortable, I bade them give me the facts. Dreadful was the story they related. My nephew it seemed, following upon his wife's mysterious death—for she had not been ill, and it was just given out she had died in her sleep—had gone completely to the devil. For weeks on end he disappeared to the big town one hundred miles to the south, and wasted his substance in debauchery and gambling. He had taken to selling land while there and strange rascals came up with deeds signed by him claiming acre after acre and authority over the people on them. This time he had been away for over three months and news had reached them that he was actually living in a 'house of joy' on the outskirts of the city. Utterly besotted with some meretricious female, he had already parted with all the family jewels and might even sell up the home estate with the residence itself. His son of about ten was running wild without control or training, and everything was at sixes and

sevens. They had sent down the old Steward to see the Chief. With disgust he had gone to the 'house of joy', but was not even admitted, and one of the proprietors, a truly nasty specimen, had actually threatened to have him beaten to death as soon as they took over the residence which would be fairly soon, he was told, as his master from drink, opium and lechery was living in a dream-world and was squandering money like water. And so I must save the family and them all; how, they could not say but I was I and all the old people looked to me. 'Right, friends,' I said, 'what can be done, shall be done and quickly, though remember it is always very difficult to help those who will not help themselves at all. And, now, refresh yourselves before you go and keep a still tongue in your heads about this whole business.'

Thinking over the matter carefully in my mind that night, I decided that this was secret business and would have to be undertaken personally and quietly. The fewer the people brought into it the better. Next morning I rode out in male dress with one follower, a quick witted youth who had been born in Grey Eyes' house and had a real flair for climbing. We took two spare horses, and in my saddlebag was a substantial sum in gold. Arriving on the evening of the fourth day near the town, we chose a grove for our headquarters, three furlongs away from the gaily-lit house of joy, and my companion went to see what he could find out. He returned an hour later, said there were four men in charge, they had a kind of office on the first floor. On the second were a dozen bed-rooms, elaborately furnished, each occupied by a beauty, he said. On the third were three suites of rooms; only one seemed occupied, a handsome man and a lovely girl were having dinner and talking lovingly, he had seen them through the window, and the description he gave of the man made it certain it was my nephew. There were no guards around the house. The owners no doubt felt very secure. The question was how was I to gain entrance to the third floor suite so as to make an appeal to my nephew, for such was my plan, or if that failed, to stun him and carry him out of the house unbeknownst to the rest of the occupants. I could not walk up walls as my man did, so it must be by the stairs. This meant waiting until the small hours of the morning when we hoped sleep would at last descend on the occupants. While my accomplice remained with the horses I crept up and made a thorough survey of the house. We both ate a simple meal, then I sent him to

watch and was soon sleeping the satisfying sleep of the just on the eve of action. At an hour after midnight I woke and moved quietly to my scout, who reported several visitors had departed, lights were going out, and soon it seemed the moment of action might arrive. I thanked him, gave him a purse of gold for expenses if need arose, told him to get back to the horses and wait. If I did not return by the first signs of the real dawn, about 5.15 probably, he was to ride for home. I would be dead. If the man he had seen in the suite came to him he was to give him a horse, twenty ashrafis and direct him as to the route to follow for home. For the rest many thanks, good luck, an interesting life and a glorious death. The poor boy fell on his knees, weeping woefully. I put my hand on his head and said bless you, child, and remember my instructions. Smoothly he slid away and I settled down comfortably against a huge tree-trunk to watch the house and wait for the moment to move, as I had done on several occasions with Grey Eyes, beloved Grey Eyes, at my side.

## XIII

"An hour must have gone by before I moved to the very quiet and completely dark house. In my earlier survey of the building I had marked down a window a few feet to the right of the door as the place of entry. It was probably closed with a cross bar from behind I had thought, and I knew well how to open up such a window noiselessly from outside. I proved right and was in a matter of minutes in the passage out of which the window opened. Securing the flaps again, I crept to the bottom of the stairs, a ghostly figure in my totally black male garments, a dagger in easy reach of each hand in my belt, and three sharp knives in the cross-belt that went over my left shoulder. This it had seemed to me was not an occasion for heavy weapons. I was on a task of persuasion, and if that failed, of abduction, not of war. I must avoid fighting as far

as possible, and if it could not be avoided, must end it quickly and quietly, with the dagger or knife in the opponent's gullet. In any case at that time of the night, such opposition as come would most probably be from one or two men at a time, not from a party attacking together.

Up the stairs, which were carpeted, I went speedily, and had almost gained the first floor landing, when I heard a slight swish near my head. Dropping to my knees, I made an upward stroke with my right-hand dagger at a dark mass just where my head had been, and found as it hurtled down near me, that I had killed some kind of bird. (Later I learned it was not uncommon in that area to guard your house with a fierce breed of large owl, trained to attack anyone who moved around the house at night. Having struck, it would hoot loudly, so that with lighted lamps, the occupants could come out and dispose of the already dazed intruder.) Leaving the dead bird, I moved upwards and having got to the first floor, suddenly saw two gleaming eyes a few yards away and, moving towards me. God in Heaven, I thought to myself, a hunting cheetah, very probably. This is where the axe would have been most useful. However as he sprang, I dropped to my knees again and both my daggers were planted deep in him as he swept over my head. Rolling over and over he made quite a noise, and I moved forward quickly knife in hand to quieten him for ever before his groans and gurgles brought some one out. Just as I had reached him and was bending down for the final coup, a tremendous blow fell on the back of my head and I felt nothing more.

My first impressions when I regained my senses were loud voices, an extremely painful throbbing head, overwhelming light and great cold. Slowly the memory of where I was and of what had happened came back to me. My eyelids had just lifted and were about to open completely, when I felt a not too gentle kick on my waist and an angry sharp voice said, 'You always were too extreme with the sandbag, Big One. I hope she doesn't get serious concussion and die or go mad and jump into a well. It's over half an hour since we brought her in and the cold by itself would, I should have thought, in her condition, have brought her to.' My eyes closed quickly again, though I trembled a little as I realised what had happened. My captors had stripped me completely and there I was spread-out stark

naked on the matting on the floor. The more I know the better, I thought; this is a terrible mess. Attention, now attention, no time for headaches. And in truth my mind became razor-keen, as I lay there pretending total unconsciousness.

'Don't worry, why don't all three of you go back to bed and leave her to me. I'll guarantee her fit and well in the morning, and then we can decide who to give her to. What a figure, what a figure, my friends. True, her face is late middle-age, but a few weeks of special treatment will bring it to justify thirty, and then if we decide to sell her permanently, fifteen to twenty thousand ashrafis I think we should get. But we're rich now, you know. So perhaps, we might keep her here for some time at least; all in common, of course, so long as I have the first call,' said a deep voice. Looking up quickly I saw a huge ruffian, very richly dressed, his fingers running perpetually over a piece of purple velvet on a small occasional table. 'You go too fast,' said a reasonable-sounding, cultured voice, 'the woman's face shows a strong character and she may well not fall in with your plans. If so, why not keep her safe and try for a ransom? She may well be a great lady and pay handsomely. In any case what was she doing here? Ought not we to find that out?' 'I'm weary of all this talk,' said a husky, sensual voice. 'Let me deal with her for a couple of days and she'll be only too eager to fall in with whatever we want. Yes, yes, I know, that bitch Marie Louise still won't go to her leper, but tonight will break her. I've got something very special for her, totally naked in that dungeon below, with many large rats rushing from side to side. She'll either go mad or a leper will seem like Heaven to her. This stuff her I could break much sooner, I am sure. She doesn't look as if she had even been beaten up regularly.'

As they had spoken, my determination has grown. These vile men must die, and tonight. True I had no weapons, no clothes even; true, my head was throbbing madly and I would probably be shaky when I stood up, but I would kill them before morning. So I lay, relaxing to build up strength, listening intently and with quick slight movements of the eye-lids, trying to see them all. 'Well, I'm the physician,' said the husky voice, 'let me do my duty.' And with a quick movement he raised my right arm and put his fingers on my pulse. 'Quite good,' he said, 'why hasn't she come round? Let me see.'

And squatting down beside me, he leant over and put his hand over my heart. It was a chance too good to miss. As he bent over, engrossed in my heart-beats, in one smooth movement my left-hand rose and its iron side came down in a killing chop on the back of his neck. He fell forward upon me, and my right hand completed the task of breaking his neck. While the three, startled, still looked, I was on my feet holding in front of me the corpse of their companion as a shield. A quick glance showed on the walls or furniture no weapons I could reach. My dead burden bore none.

With a roar the two younger men rushed at me, their swords out calling 'yield, woman, or you die.' I waited until they were very near then flung the dead body right on the sword of one and side-stepping the other's blade, gave the first a tremendous kick in the crotch. My foot was bare and I hurt it badly, but the effect on the kicked man was very satisfactory. With a heart-rending-shriek he tumbled upon the floor, and rolled around in pain. Quickly, I seized the sword that had dropped from his hand. Automatically a smile came to my lips, and calling out 'to hell with all pimps,' I engaged the second attacker. He was a good swordsman, this, and on another occasion might have held me. But that night I was fey. In three strokes I got his measure. Thereafter at any moment I could have killed him. But cruelty entered my heart then and I played with him as a cat does with a mouse. I cut off first his left ear and then his right ear. I sliced away the fingers of his sword-arm, and hustled him so much, that his breast heaving he cried. 'Kill me, kill me.' The leader, Big One, had tried to intervene attacking me from behind. Quickly, I had whirled round and jumping within his sword-arm, given him with my knee so tough a blow in his crotch, that he too was left moaning piteously on the floor. Tiring a little at last of my cruel play, I killed with a straight thrust the man I was fighting.

Then turning to the two on the floor, I said, 'Come fight. Take whatever weapon you like and fight. I like not killing men who lie about like invalids. Die you must, so die fighting.' 'Let us live, lady,' said Big One, 'and I shall give you enormous treasure. You can take what you like and leave.' 'Nay,' said I, 'you made me naked, you stood over me gloating. Can I let you live now ? Die fighting or I shall execute you.' Big One rose to his full height. 'Come, wrestle then,' he said, 'drop that sword and take hold.' I did, and

soon found though he had greater strength, in skill he was no match for me. Once again, cruelty filled my heart, I broke both his arms, I tore off his right ear, I threw him again and again, I kicked him and stamped on him and finally with a red mist before my eyes, I throttled him to death, my grip so tight upon his neck that I found it difficult to loosen my hands when his soul had fled to hell. As, dropping Big One's body, I turned thoroughly disgusted with myself, I saw the man I had incapacitated first, trying to creep away on his knees. Too tired to think anymore I just picked up a sword and with one stroke cut off his head.

Staggering to a seat near a table on which stood a decanter of wine and some glasses, quickly I filled and tossed off one. That moment was to me not a moment of victory. It was a moment of self-revulsion. I hated myself; I, a soldier, had been wantonly cruel and worst of all, had enjoyed being cruel. I shuddered as I thought of the pleasure, gradually throttling that huge neck had given me, of the ecstasy that had moved through my veins as I, superior in skill and strength, tortured that swordsman, yes, tortured, killing him, slowly, slowly, slowly, glowing within myself all the time. I had to kill those men undoubtedly. There was nothing wrong in that. But the torture I had inflicted and the self-gratification it had afforded me, that was wrong, terribly wrong indeed. Oh vile, vicious woman, I said to myself, fall upon that sword now and make an end. You deserve no better death. Then the thought of what I had come for struck me. Almost at the same moment I got a glimpse of myself in a steel mirror and started back at the horrible, blood-stained, torn-about, naked, me that looked back. Quickly searched I for water and found in the next room a bath with three huge pots of very cold water. One after the other I poured all the three over my body, washing away both the blood and the horror. But every week almost, I wake one night with that scene fresh before me; the guilt of that vicious cruelty still makes me tremble. I repent, I say to myself, I repent, but the feeling of guilt never goes. That you have some magic here, Sir, is certain. I have told you things that I had never seen so clearly nor told myself so openly before. It is safe enough to tell you of course; do not men call you the treasure-house of secrets ? Well I have told you, perhaps I shall feel better, but I am afraid I shall still wake up some nights hating myself for having been so despicable."

"What you say is true, lady, it is not so much what a person does as how it is done and with what thoughts and emotions, that is basic. The world generally sees only the deed and judges accordingly, but the conscientious like you cannot lightly forget all that went into the deed, including the state of mind at the time of doing it. So I will not just say to you, 'They had merited death. You killed them. Forget the rest," said the Assistant Collector. 'The noble spirit that is you continues to be harassed by the thought of that lapse from your normal high standard years after it happened. But you have suffered enough. It is time this torture of yourself by yourself stopped. In such extremities there is but one remedy I know, the Mercy of God. If you agree, let us seek it together." The Khanum noddled. "Ancient are the languages of the prayers of our faiths and we do not understand them ourselves always, so I beseech the Most High in our common modern tongue," said the Assistant Collector. Sitting up straight in his chair he placed both his hands palm upward upon the table and so did Zubeida Khanum. "Almighty Lord," he began, "Master of Battles, Giver of Victory, this day we seek from thee mercy for a victor. The hearts of women and men hold no secrets from thee, and thou knowest the woe that wracks the soul of my co-petitioner. Free her from this heavy burden, oh Remover of Miseries, and let her nights pass without horror. The wrong was of the mind, Tranquillity-Bestower, and has been assuaged by much suffering of the mind. If any guilt still remains, Most Powerful, Purposeful Judge, and for it punishment there must be, transfer it from her who has already borne so much, Renderer of Favours, to me, who too have been guilty on occasion in hand-to-hand combat of the same sin of cruel joy in inflicting uncalled for pain instead of ending quickly. Place the burden upon me, Most Merciful, so that free from its load, her spirit may in right thoughts, words and deeds, still further fulfil itself in your service." The Assistant Collector stopped and for a few moments both sat in silence, their hands palm upward, still upon the table. Then said the Khanum, "None but a true dervish could have said that prayer. I would touch his hand, lord," and getting up she bent across the table and for a minute rested her forehead on his right palm. Lifting her head, she said, "and now I weep, lord, so I will go out and come back when I have myself more under control."

The Assistant Collector sat on, his mind almost blank, his eyes upon his palms. When finally he looked up, Pribhdas and Mohamed Khan were standing in front of him, looking very serious. "Has anything happened, gentlemen? Why this gravity, and in any case why are you still around, Pribhdasji? You should have been snug in bed an hour ago," said the Assistant Collector. "I could not sleep," said the Sheristedar, "so the Naik and I put up a ravti near that tree and waited, talking until it was time for him to see the noble lady to her pavilion. That was a marvellous prayer you said, Sir. It may perhaps, to your sorrow, be accepted." "What," demanded the Assistant Collector, "have you two been listening to our talk? God in Heaven, hadn't we decided—?" "No, Sir, no," said the Naik, "not a word of your talk did we hear, nothing but an occasional murmuring. Only you raised your voice in the prayer. Sonorously it came in the silence to us and we listened. Then we saw the noble lady go out and our friend said we had better come in and tell you what he thought." "Right," said the Assistant Collector, relaxing, "speak then." "Knowing you, I shall put it bluntly," said Pribhdas. "This offering to take on the guilt of other people is a very serious business. It can have the gravest consequences on the offerer. I am afraid you have laid in for yourself much pain and suffering, perhaps lack of success in worldly matters too. Lord, a great dervish resides in you, I have often felt, but I implore you, be careful, please be very careful." "Thank you very much," said the Assistant Collector, "it is indeed kind of you to tell me this. But tell me one thing more, Sufi. Will this shadow over the Khanum's mind disappear?" "God alone knows all the secrets of the future and the past," was the answer "but I think, yes, very probably, yes." "God be praised" said the Assistant Collector "and now go to bed in peace, Pribhdasji. I assure you I shall make myself no one else's sacrifice tonight. And you too Mohamed Khan, rest while you can. The Khanum still has much to say, and will take more than an hour at least. God bless you both."

As they left, the Naik's assistant Anwar came in carrying on a tray two large gaily-coloured mugs, covered by small plates. "What have you there, Anwar Khan?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Dhanji had asked me to bring in tea at a convenient moment, Sir, and I thought this would be best, with a break in the conversation," was the answer. "The moment is certainly well-chosen," said the

Assistant Collector, "but if it is tea, where is the pot and the milk and sugar?" "Oh, Sir," said Anwar Khan, "it's all in there, you see I boiled the tea-leaves in the sugared milk and put a little mint and lemon-grass in too, so I hope it'll be good." The Assistant Collector who generally took his tea without sugar or milk, endeavoured to smile and said, "Thank you very much. I'm sorry you were troubled. The noble lady will certainly enjoy the tea. By the way, you didn't put any butter in the mixture, too, did you?" "No, Sir, I didn't. Should I have?" asked Anwar. "No, no," said the Assistant Collector, "this I am sure is excellent." As Anwar bowed himself out, the lady came in and taking her seat, sipped the liquid in the cup. "Did you have this specially made for me?" she asked. "You don't like it, I know. The tale of your austere tea-drinking is in more than one ballad," and she sang

"No burden on anyone is this lord,
No milk or sugar even needs he,
Black tea he carries in his own red pouch.
He boils the water from the brook,
A tin pannikin is all his cup.
Gaily he chats as he sips his tea
And with every half-cup, a problem solves he.
Oh, the lord's tea-drinking! Blessed be,
His lorh, pannikin, tea and he."

"You're making that up, Zoe Banoo. Come now, tell the truth. I may deserve to be made fun of, but surely not to this extent," said the Assistant Collector. "What," said the lady, "You haven't heard this before? Why, the famous Sarfaraz himself wrote it, I was told, and sang it as the last item at a huge wedding entertainment a fortnight ago. And the strange thing, my very sophisticated informant said, was that in that quite fashionable audience not only did nobody burst out laughing, but they had it repeated thrice, and on the third occasion, half of them sang it with him. Aye, the people know you better than you think." "Be that as it may," said the Assistant Collector "to answer your question, this tea was Anwar's idea. I am glad you like it. I won't, but well" and lifting the mug to his lips he drained it down. "Good health," said the lady following suit.

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"To continue, my first job was finding clothes I could get into. Big One's would do, and I broke open a chest or two to find them. Finally, there I was a prince on his wedding-night, covered with brocade, a turban of gold and silver cloth low-down on my forehead, the front of my face muffled in a silvern scarf, only the eyes and nose showing, and by the special dispensation of providence, an axe almost as good as my own in my hand. Rushing up the stairs two at a time, I tried the door of the room my nephew was said to be in. It was locked. A blow with the axe, and the door swung open. My nephew was in bed with beside him a very striking brunette; no man could be blamed for being attracted by her. I noted with satisfaction that my nephew's first movement on this rude intrusion was to jump out of bed and seize his axe that had been lying on a nearby chair. The girl too ranged herself beside him, dagger in hand. 'Fools,' I said, 'I am a friend. Out of her at once if you do not want to be hanged. The despicable scoundrels who owned this horrible place have all been killed, and if you are found here tomorrow, the only man on the premises, by evening you will be dangling from a tree and you too beside him, pretty one. So away, oh man, and the girl had better rejoin her companions on the floor below." "No," said he, "she I must have or I stay," and the girl said, "Go, you're in danger. As for me" and she raised the dagger aiming with a steady hand at her heart. 'Fool' cried I, slapping her sharply, 'is this a time for heroics? All right, take her too and get out. Three furlongs away to the right you will find a man in a grove. Tell him your name and he will give you two horses, the proper directions to get home, and twenty ashrafis. Ride as if the devil were behind you.' 'We won't need money. I have enough,' said the girl, displaying a fat purse. To my nephew I said 'I shall be calling on you soon at your house and I do not promise that then I will not skin you alive.' 'You are, you are,' he hesitated, 'Zu...' 'Yes,' I said 'I am. Now away.' The graceless fellow fell on his knees and kissed my hand and several minutes were wasted while I had to embrace him, and God help me, even the girl. Then they were out of the house and the work I had come for was finished.

Yes, the task was over, but my duty was not done. It is strange, is it not, how often from the performance of one duty there immediately springs forth another almost as exacting? What would

happen to the twelve women in the rooms below if I just disappeared ? Vicious they might be, many probably more unfortunate than vicious, but in any case was I not responsible for the horrible situation in which they would find themselves ? Must I not solve their problem too ? 'This governorship of the North-East has ruined your character completely, Zubeida,' I said to myself, 'you must always be taking the world's troubles on your head.' Down the steps I rushed making as much clatter as I could, then in my best parade-ground voice thundered 'out of yout rooms at once, women.' All twelve came out, hesitatingly. 'Now,' said I, 'listen carefully. The four scoundrels in charge of the house are dead, and you are free to do what you like. What do you want to do ? Answer one at a time.' A hubbub broke out as they huddled together. Breaking it up by slapping two or three lightly, I said, 'You've got to get away, you know and quickly. If the authorities find you here, you'll probably hang.' 'But we've nothing. How can we go ?' They cried in unison.

'Well,' said I, 'I think we can arrange something for you. Step out, the four strongest,' and I marched them down to the first floor office. With horror they gasped as they saw the corpses and would have run back, but I pricked them, with a little dagger I had picked up and said 'now, then, you must know where your late masters kept their coin.' Two went unerringly to a strong door in the wall. Soon my axe had broken down the door and four chests, two of gold coins and two of silver, the women carried into the passage. Calling down the others, I formed them into a line and said 'gold to your right, silver to your left. A handful of each and pass on.' Avidly they seized their handfuls. There still remained a lot of silver and some gold, 'another handful of silver and 6 gold coins for each,' I said 'hurry,' and all the chests were empty. 'Now,' said I 'disappear. You all seem women of experience. I notice no simple innocents among you. So, go, avoid the town, get away from the neighbourhood as soon as you can. You are rich beyond your fondest dreams. Go to your relatives, if you have any. All of you have looks and wealth, most of you seem intelligent, turn respectable, get married. In God's name, go, and may the fortune each one deserves attend her.' In ten minutes the house was rid of eleven of them. They had all scuttled up to their rooms, got a bundle or two and disappeared. The twelfth came up to me boldly and said, 'Lord, you need a handmaiden, I will go with you and serve you. I have fallen in love with your eyes. If you will

not take me, I will kill myself.' 'Do,' I said 'dear lady, do. But before you do, think of why I muffle myself up so. The rest of me is very loathsome. Shall I disclose it to you?' and I made to remove the scarf. With a shriek, she ran down and was soon lost to view in the darkness.

## XIV

"Reaching the window on the ground floor through which I had entered the house, I was just about to take down the bar which held it fast and slide out into the dark, when a low moan fell on my ears. A few seconds later it was repeated. The sound came from somewhere under my feet. Clearly, this business is not yet over, said I to myself, making my way to the narrow stairs that led below the surface. On the wall of the landing hung several torches, ready to be lighted. I got one going, and axe in my right hand, torch in my left, cautiously made my way down into the basement. A few feet from the bottom of the stairs, was a locked door and from behind it came the sound I had heard. Setting the torch in a convenient bracket on the wall, with two blows of the axe I broke open the door. One of the most grisly sights of all time met my eyes, a human head emerging from a mass of rats, one of the arms still moving, though with rats hanging on it, in an endeavour to keep them off the face. The light of the torch distracted the rats a little, and the next moment, feeling its heat as I singed the mass, passing a blazing torch up and down, they fled from the tortured body. Two, however, huge ones, held on to one shoulder and I literally had to turn them off, taking the risk of setting fire to their victim too.

When they had all fled, I turned to the body. Deprived of its grotesque covering, it had tumbled to the ground. The woman was still breathing, though except for the face, every part of her bore dreadful bite marks. There did not seem much chance of her living now. I had seen people whose blood got so vitiated from a single

rat-bite that after days of delirium they died. It might be best to put her out of her misery straightaway, I thought, and then again, it is not for you to decide on death; she breathes, your duty is to keep her alive if you can. So, picking her up by the back of her neck and holding her at arm's length in front of me, I made my way up the stairs to the office on the first floor with the corpses of the four proprietors lying uglily around. It was necessary to burn the rat-bites, I knew, but with what? Anyhow the first thing was to clean her and so to a bath-room, to be laid on the floor and have bucket upon bucket of cold water poured over her. By the time I had finished, she was conscious, and looking at me with frank eyes, asked curiously, 'Who are you?' 'That's beside the point,' I said, 'Get up if you can now and show me where I can find something to burn your bites with.' She tried to get up but could not, so I carried her wrapped in a sheet to the end-room of the first floor which she said was hers, and rubbed her whole body lavishly with the contents of two large bottles of some stinging aromatic mixture, that made my palms burn and must have given her open wounds a truly hellish time. Except for a screwing up of the eyes and a slight ah, no movement or sound came from her and it was then I decided that I liked her.

After a few minutes, when she sat up, I said to her, 'Now you can go where you like. The men who owned you are dead, the house empty. I am sorry I gave away all the gold and silver to the others, but if you come with me, you can have a purse to take away with you in a quarter of an hour.' 'Sir,' she said, 'you should not have saved me, if you were going to forsake me. I know I shall be very ill in a few hours, so if you won't look after me, just give me that dagger and go your ways in peace. I thank you sincerely for the service you rendered me.' 'Fool,' I said, 'come get into some men's clothes, will you? I'll take you with me anyhow.' She staggered to her feet and stood swaying until I put an arm around her. Then she pointed to a cupboard and when I led her to it, took out a bottle and two mugs. Her she filled to the top, mine one-third. 'Good health, lord,' she said and poured the fiery spirit down her throat. I raised my mug in salute and cautiously took a sip. It was fragrant and warming and soon my mug was empty too. 'I feel strong now,' she said, 'you say the owners are dead. Have you

looked into their secret store yet? No, then if you will take me there, I shall show you some wonderful things.' In men's clothes, she looked a strikingly handsome cavalier, her golden hair and very blue eyes distinguishing her from everyone else.

Walking firmly enough, she led the way to the office, then with scarce a glance at the bodies lying around, went to the far wall and laying her hand on a flower painted there, said, 'Break down the panel.' I did and she took out a curiously-carved jewel-box, which opened out in three tiers. Marvellous was the pearl necklace that lay in the top compartment, and I slipped it round her neck, saying 'may your future be as lovely as the sheen of these pearls and your heart as tranquil as their overwhelming purity.' Tears came into her eyes as she said, 'Lord, at last it seems I may come to harbour.' The second tier disclosed a superb diamond necklace and the third emerald earrings and bracelets of a most surprising quality. Tying the lot up in a silk handkerchief I handed it to her, saying, 'Now young lady, so handsomely are you endowed, that we shall have no difficulty in marrying you to a prince.' 'Marriage, men, God forbid,' she said. 'Were I in my own land, I would go to a place where there are only holy women, who spend their time in prayer and fasting. Here, I am your servant, and strange it is, feel a confidence in you I never felt in woman or man before.' While she was speaking, I was looking at a bundle of papers, and seeing my nephew's name on one or two, slid the lot into the pocket of my top robe. 'Come now,' I said, 'the false dawn is not far off, and we must get to the grove before then, or my man and horses will have gone.' 'Just one thing, Lord,' she said, looking at the corpses properly for the first time, 'I would like to see this den of iniquity burn. May we not set it on fire before we leave?' 'Why not,' said I. 'It'll cover up all traces too.' So several containers of oil and fat I strewed on the wooden floors, and splitting open quite a number of mattresses, lighted the cotton in them aud flung it around; then when a satisfactory fire had started building up I raced out into the open carrying her, since she still seemed rather shaky on her legs. As, reaching the shelter of the trees, I stood for a moment to look back at the flow that was just beginning, for the first time she smiled. Then she said, 'Lord, my name is Marie Louise. I told the cruel physician in there when he locked me in that room with the rats, that soon would his corpse be burning and his soul in Hell. And by

your hand it has come to pass. God be praised. Now if death comes, let it,' and she fainted in my arms.

'I was just beginning to be uneasy,' said the young man with the horses, as I stood before him with my burden. Two horses he said had been taken by the people I had sent. Now all was ready. Would I breakfast before starting ? 'No,' said I, 'give me anything dry you have to munch on the way, but we mustn't wait. This youth I carry cannot travel yet, so I'll take him on to a nearby safe place I know. I'll put him in front of me. You get back home by a round-about route, visiting your sister. She'll be happy to see you I'm sure; give her my regards. And a still tongue, remember. I've never left home. Now let's make a comfortable seat for the invalid with this quilt, and God be with you.' And I was off with Marie Louise a dead weight in front of me between my arms. After a few miles, I felt her move and looking at her face found her weeping silently. 'What's wrong,' I asked, 'is the movement very painful ?' 'No,' she answered. 'It's not physical pain. What makes me cry is the loss of an illusion. You are a woman, lord.' 'Splendour of God,' I cried 'of course I am. Is that any reason for weeping ?' 'Alas, lord,' she said, 'I thought I had for the first time in my life met a man who could be a true friend, who combined the strength of a man with the gentleness of a woman. And now you are a woman, so I must cry.' 'Idiot' I said. 'Thank God I am a woman. Your body is burning already and you are probably going to be very ill at the safe place to which I am taking you. If I were a man, I would at most leave you there in someone's care and go on. As I am a woman, I shall feel compelled to stay there, nurse you and fight Death for your life. So now, stop being miserable and tell yourself you're going to hold on to life, that at its worst it is better than death, that you want to see the next spring and the new flowers, and that you are going to enjoy every living in my old, old house. Go on, say it to yourself and make yourself believe it, and if you can't live without man, in good time we shall find you one you can respect and trust and who knows, even love. So your future is settled, golden head, just live, stupid' and I gave her a pat on her cheek. Gratefully she looked up at me, smiled and relaxed.

By the time I got to my old nurse's place, twenty miles from where I had started, Marie Louise was muttering incoherently and

had to be held in position. Thanking God as I came to a halt at the solitary cottage set in the middle of a field, I jumped off and carried my patient indoors. A young woman barred my way demanding to know who I was. 'Where's Nurse?' I said. 'Produce her, and don't ask silly questions.' Overawed, she brought in the old lady, seventy now, who recognised and embraced me, had Marie Louise on a bed in the best room, took off her clothes, asked me, 'Bites? Rats, yes' and when I nodded said, 'Very doubtful. Still we'll see. Now you better get to that well and have a bath and I'll send my daughter-in-law with some proper clothes for you. And put your horse in the barn behind. Come here, you didn't sleep last night, did you? Well, after the bath, food, and sleep. I'll look after this pretty creature, never fear.'

When, nine hours later, I came into the room, Nurse was lying on a mattress by the side of the patient's bed. Beckoning to me to sit down she said, 'Are you wise to try and keep this very experienced, shall we say, female alive? I don't think she can ever be happy or content. She knows more wickedness and vice than even I thought existed. She roamed around in at least four languages besides ours all night. I understood two of the others, and I wish I hadn't. Really there is nothing to save there; the soul itself is utterly corroded.' 'No, Nurse, no,' I said. 'Listen to what she said to me,' and I told her about her remark in discovering I was a woman. 'Basically I think she is decent human being worth troubling about,' I urged. 'In any case the outcome is not in our hands. Let us do the best we can and leave the rest to the Great Decider, shall we?' And when she agreed, 'Now, off you go to bed. I'm all right for the next ten hours. Just tell me what to do if the fever rises.' So for five days and nights Nurse and I in turns watched and worked beside her, hearing snatches of incredible doings, almost seeing as on a screen mean murder, foul intrigue, treacherous conspiracy, disgusting cruelty and hypocrisy, the vicious great equalled only by the vicious poor. After one of the shifts, I was so bemused that I found myself in the barn, my head on my horse's neck, sobbing bitterly and saying, 'No, Raksh, it cannot be, it cannot. Human beings cannot be so vile.'

On the sixth day, the fever fell and with it the fever in the mind. When I went in, Nurse and Marie Louise were discussing the

merits of certain herbs found in the neighbourhood. Looking straight at her, Nurse said, 'Well, the devils have left her at last. It is now for her so to live that they never come back again.' Marie Louise promised solemnly, 'I will. Nurse, God help me, I will. Both of you will never have to wish you had let me die.' 'Good girl,' I said. 'Now you stay with Nurse for the next fortnight, get your strength back. I've got some urgent things to do, and will come to take you home after 14 days.' 'Very well,' she said, 'but won't you tell me your name?' I did and she exclaimed, 'Why, then you must be the aunt of the very nice but very simple gentleman who was so obsessed with one of the girls that he actually came to live there. He'd signed away almost everything to Big One, and they were planning to get the last remnants from him, his family house and home farms. I'd actually prepared the deed. You see, I used to do a lot of their secretarial work, because I could write and knew the laws. But that didn't save me, when the rich leper offered them a very large sum for me. I see now, you came to get your nephew and, thank God, the rest followed.' 'Well, since you know about the papers, what about these?' said I taking out the bundle. Four related to my nephew and there were a dozen others. I O Us, letters, confessions, some from very well-known people. She told me what she knew about each matter. Keeping the sale-deeds my nephew had signed in which possession had not yet been taken, and the further sale-deed he was to have signed, I burned all the others. 'There goes a very big fortune, lord, I suppose you know,' said Marie Louise. 'If you had been a worldly person a word to the signatories that you have the documents, and the regular payments would have flowed in to you.' 'And would you have recommended that course?' I asked. 'Let me be honest,' she said, after a struggle 'I suppose, yes. You see these men are mostly rascals too. It's not unjust to despoil them. But naturally it would be too low a thing for you to do. I see that.' 'And I hope soon blackmail will be too mean a thing for you to do, too, you wicked child,' said I with a smile. 'Keep well until we meet.' 'Please,' she said, 'be careful, don't run into danger, please,' and so we parted.

I rode home first and after spending a couple of days there, went on to my nephew's. Many years had passed since I had been there, and I was shocked to see the dilapidation in what had always seemed to me a model estate. My nephew received me honourably.

After lunch I took him aside, and gave him his sale-deeds concluded and drawn. He looked at them and at me, and could not speak. I called for a light and burnt them ceremoniously in his presence. His son, his old man of business, the girl he had brought away, some old servants, had also come in, and after gulping with embarrassment for a while, he told them what was being burnt, thanked me profusely, and promised he would not wander any more, but stay at home and look after the land and his people. I liked the look of his son, talked to him for a while, found he had not been trained at all, either in arms or management, but had natural skill and could read and write. Resolving to see something of him from time to time, I said good-bye, inviting both father and son to visit me whenever they could spare the time. I would be delighted to see them.

Ten days later, about three in the afternoon, the son, your Alfresun came. He had ridden over madly and was totally distraught. He stood in front of me and tried to speak and could not, and swayed from side to side and made strangled noises. Finally, I got up and slapped him hard, first on one cheek and then on the other. A stream of tears and then, as I held him in my arms, the news, dreadful for him to tell, dreadful for me to hear. His father not having come down from the room till half-past ten, his old servant had gone up, and then all in tears had run to the boy and called him to the room. Alfresun went in and was stunned to find dead on the bed the naked body of his father's concubine covered with strap-weals. She had obviously been strangled, from the marks on her neck and the look on her face. And by her side lay his father, naked too, but quite undisturbed as if sleeping peacefully. Only he could not be awakened and was not breathing. Alfresun had held his hand, felt his heart and made quite sure he was dead. He had then locked the door of the chamber, sworn the old servant to secrecy and had straightaway ridden over to me. And now here he was, sobbing and asking what he was to do.

I hugged him once and then said, 'Look, boy, we face misfortunes and defeat them, not let ourselves be crushed by them. So you will go straight home, announce that your father and his friend have died, having been bitten by a snake, and that the funeral will take place tonight. Say you sent me a messenger immediately on learning this and I am on my way over. I shall be there about

half-an-hour after you make the announcement, and will then take charge. Now, look me straight in the eyes and smile, yes, smile, even though you know and I know that your heart is breaking with sorrow, for you loved your father,—I saw that the other day—and the way of his dying was undoubtedly dreadful, not what one would wish one's worst enemy. Come, and the boy looked straight at me and smiled. 'Good,' I said, 'keep the room door locked until I am there. Off now, no wait, your horse the steward told me had been ridden mercilessly. Leave it behind and ride one of mine over, and remember a steed merits care at least as much as a man.'

So he went and I followed and played out the melancholy face-saving tragedy, every one guessing that something had gone very wrong indeed, no one knowing what except the boy, the old servant and myself. With the assistance of the old man I bathed and laid out the bodies, trying my utmost to remove from the girl's face the strangled look. As for my nephew, his face seemed so tranquil that it would have been difficult to believe that he had done the beating, had I not known that the satisfaction of strange desire brings a look of happiness that is difficult to tell apart from that of the virtuously happy. My own brother too had looked like that after beating me up in my childhood. I recollected. God, what was wrong with the line, I wondered. Were we being repaid thus for a thousand years of pride, of great chieftainship nobly fulfilled, of the thousands upon thousands we had killed? To these mysteries there was no answer, but the day's work had to be done. So at the right time, the funeral prayers were said, the bodies taken in procession, and duly buried, the funeral letters written, visits received and the full pattern observed.

Alfresun came to me that night and said, 'Great-aunt, if you do not stay with me for the next year at least, I shall go mad. I know nothing, and the only person I was ever fond of is taken away thus. So please stay and help me. It is your father's house.' I could not say no to him, for after all what other duty had I then? And so it was from that grim house that I rode out to the Nurse four days later to keep my promise to Marie Louise.

## XV

"I entered the Nurse's cottage to the sound of a clear melodious voice singing in a strange tongue. A pause and then two childish voices joined that adult voice in what was obviously a chorus. At the end, all three voices burst into merry laughter and there was a loud clapping of hands. Hesitating to disturb such spontaneous enjoyment, I walked out quietly and made my way to the back. Nurse was in the kitchen, and seeing me came out into the yard with a mug of hot spiced milk, which she insisted I drink before we began talking. While I drank she kept looking at me and when I had finished led me to a low seat and said, 'Tell me. Something's very wrong, no?' I told her about my nephew and all that had happened. Sighing she said, 'I warned your mother. I told her not to get her lord a second wife, just because she hadn't borne him a child after some years. You will have a child, I said. But she would not listen. She loved your father too much. She wanted the succession secured, so that he should have peace of mind.'

'But that wouldn't account for this very strange behaviour of my nephew and his father before him, surely?' I asked. 'I know my father's second wife well, don't forget. She was a perfect dear, sweet and unselfish. Every time I came back with father from a battle, she would insist on bathing me herself and dressing me up in feminine clothes. You poor child, she would say, having to do all the frightful fighting, and no amount of telling her that I enjoyed war and delighted in the clash of axes had any effect on her at all. Her sympathy and pity just naturally flowed out to me.' 'Oh, yes, I know,' said the Nurse, 'our second Banoo was a good soft woman, and when you've said that, you've said all. She hadn't the spirit or the grit of your mother. Have you ever considered what it must have meant to your father, who really adored your mother, to have at her behest, to turn to this second, beautiful and all woman

undoubtedly, to procreate his children? If an element of cruelty entered into his private behaviour with her, it wouldn't surprise me. We know little about these things, of course, but I am inclined to think that this must have lain at the root of the ghastly state of mind and vicious conduct of your brother and his son. A strange thing, heredity. The fathers eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

'All conjecture, dear Nurse,' I said. 'In my case, I hope it won't affect the great-nephew I have agreed to superintend now?' 'It might not, since at this young age he's in your good hands. But I wouldn't be at all sure. I'll tell you something. Marry him off when he is seventeen or so to an attractive girl, tough of mind and able to stand up to him. Make sure you know her well enough to be able to tell her about his father and grandfather, so that she knows what she may perhaps have to deal with and will be ready to retort appropriately if necessary. She must of course keep all knowledge of her knowing from him. Yes, that may be his salvation, though it may be he is not touched by the taint at all. Firmness and tenderness combined in a handsome and clever woman can bring both Solomon and Satan to heel, was what my mother told me, and I must confess I found it true. Did you know that I had three husbands before the one you saw me with? Two of them were the scum of the earth, one a very learned scholar, yet to me, all were loyal and loving. Nay, sweetheart, don't look so grim. No knot will ever be able to resist the sharp edge of your mind and character. I know you.' 'You flatter me, Nurse,' I said. 'I know very little about these women's skills and the holding of men. By the grace of God, Grey Eyes and I fell in love at sight and remained in love until his death. Nay, I love him still and I think, wherever he is, peace be with him, his mind and heart still dwell lovingly upon me. *But enough of this. Tell me about the guest I imposed on you.*'

'You heard her singing, didn't you?' said the Nurse smiling. 'I'll tell you just this. If you don't want her, leave her here with me. She is such fund to be with and to watch. My grandchildren adore her, my daughter-in-law, a suspicious person generally, nas quite taken to her, and my son has become her elder brother. She is good, you were quite right, and has a natural gaiety that makes everything easy. And a hard worker she is too, in the house or in the garden,

and a wonderful story-teller while she sits sewing. I haven't been so amused or interested for ages. Moreover, she has no female tricks, no coquetry. You know quite a number of men come to consult me, some young, some rich, many quite good-looking. To her, all they are visitors. *She doesn't seem to see them as men at all. So, if* you like, she can make her home with me. When she's recovered from what she has been through, in a couple of years perhaps, if she *likes someone I'll show her, we'll have her married. She is far* too much woman to want to live alone for ever.' 'Well,' said I. 'That is a first-rate report and a great relief. I was wondering what *to do about her. Let's talk to her, shall we ?'*

We went in, causing Marie Louise, who was sitting on the floor, teaching one of the boys to draw, to jump up and say. 'So, you've come and exactly when you said ! Oh, I'm so glad,' and dropping on one knee she kissed my right hand. Nurse told her what she had been saying to me, and I said, 'Now, what is your wish ? You have in fact not two, but three courses, *open to you, for don't* let us forget you're quite a rich woman. That silk handkerchief you still have, haven't you ?' 'Yes,' she said, 'our friend put it under my pillow when *I was ill, and when I got well, I still* kept it there, it's quite safe.' 'Well, then,' said I, 'if you sell only two or three of those stones, you'll have enough to take you *wherever you want to go, to your own* country perhaps, where you may be able to settle down using the rest of your jewels as your capital. Or you can accept Nurse's kind offer and *be happy here. Or . . 'and* I hesitated. 'That's it,' she said, 'you don't want me. All right, I'll stay here, and she broke into most piteous sobs. 'Stop it, silliness,' I said, 'or Nurse will put you across *her knee and give you a real* spanking, and if she won't, I'll give you something to cry for. Stop ! I hesitated, because mine is no life for a young woman. I am in one place today and twenty miles away tomorrow. My old house rarely sees me for a fortnight at a stretch. And my axe is often in my hand; when I may be cut down, none can say. And now, I have in addition to look after great-nephew, so I shall be even less at home. If you come to stay with me, you will often be alone in a rather grey, dark old house, your only companions old retainers, no children to play or sing with, no young men to laugh with. You are welcome to come if you want to, but don't say I didn't warn you.' 'Lady,' she said, 'I would serve you.

I am sure I shall be happy in your house. I will learn much merely by being there.' 'So be it,' said Nurse, settling the matter, 'and when you feel lonely, you are always welcome to pay us a visit. This cottage is yours just as much as ours.'

Farewell was said with much embracing and many tears, and an hour later Marie Louise and I set out, she in male dress too, with an elaborately tied gay turban hiding her fair hair, riding an easy-paced mare I bought from Nurse's nephew, who would much rather have presented it to her, and only took the money when I threatened him with a slapping-match, if he would not. Nurse intervened then, saying, 'fool, take the gold. I do not want a funeral in this house, and after you have borne six of her slaps, that is what I shall have to prepare for.' So he took the gold piece and to make him feel easy in his mind, I gripped his hand so firmly in shaking it that he went pale with the pain. After we had gone about fifteen miles at a fair pace I found my companion lagging behind, and looking back, saw her reeling in the saddle. Reining in I let her come up and said, 'What is this? Are you feeling ill?' 'No, lady,' she said, 'but it is so long since I have ridden that I am afraid the world is going round and round me.'

Dismounting, I plucked her from her saddle and put her in front of me on Raksh, making her hold on to the reins of her own mare, so as to bring her along with us. Leaning back between my arms, she sighed with satisfaction and said, 'This is good.' 'Not at all,' I said, 'it reduces our speed at least by a quarter. Clearly you are out of condition. No fault of yours, the confined life you led and your illness would be enough to make anyone feeble. But we must put it right as soon as possible. A five-mile walk for you first thing in the morning tomorrow. And at three in the afternoon an hour bareback in the stableyard. By the time I go to Alfresun's in ten days, you must be fit enough to spend six hours in the saddle without being too tired. Well?' 'As your ladyship pleases,' she said with a smile. And she was as good as her word. I worked her hard for the next few days and she responded well. The axe she found too heavy for her, but she was quick and handy with the straight sword, and then it was she introduced me to foil-play, a truly elegant pastime, with its inherent courtesies and courtly phraseology, its en guard, and ho la and touche, its quick move-

ments, studied passes and supple wrist-work. On the third day I was as good as her, and on the fourth I pinked her again and again. She drew herself up and saluting me said, I fence with human beings not with steel-wristed, steel-hearted Amazons.' I burst out laughing, whereupon she threw down her weapon, and rushed at me striking out with her fists.

Catching her round the waist, I held her up on high and threatened to put her into the horse-pond to cool off. 'Please,' she said, 'I'm sorry, I'll behave' and when I put her down laughed and laughed. 'I forget,' she said, 'that you have been a warrior since you were twelve, and your life has often depended on the quickness of your eye and hand. *You must be better than anyone else.*' '*No,*' said *I*, 'not anyone else even now perhaps, though most of those who fought better than me have by now passed away. Still since you take a beating too badly, I'll take you with me to Alfresun's. You can teach him the foils, also courtly manners, the art of bowing and of listening to a lady as if she alone existed in all the world while he was listening to her. You may even teach him to move gracefully to music, *though I doubt if he'll ever be very good at that, for he's* stockily built. Yes, I think it will be good to expose him to you, especially since you tell me men mean nothing to you now and boys consequently, even less than nothing.' 'Oh, Zubeida Khanum,' she asked roguishly, 'wisest of women, is this for Alfresun's benefit or mine?' 'Sweet child,' said I, 'I want him to realise that a man can find pleasure in a woman's company, play and laugh and talk with her, understand she is female, sense her attraction, yet respect her and be a real friend to her. It is not too exacting a role for you, is it, loveliest of all the teachers there have ever been in this land?'

'God in Heaven, noble lady,' she cried 'how old is this boy?' 'Reasonably old,' I said 'we ripen early here. He hasn't killed in battle yet, I think, but he can take responsibility and bears himself *well. I gave him many instructions about the estate before I left* and look forward to his having carried out most of them by now.' 'Well,' she said, 'I'll be open with you because it would be stupid to be otherwise. Your sage eyes would pierce deep into my heart. If there is empathy between your great-nephew and me, if I don't dislike him and he doesn't bore me—many great men have done so, much to their discomfiture—I shall try and contribute whatever I can towards

making him what you obviously want him to be, a gentleman, without anything to reproach himself with, as they say in my language. The other part of that, without fear, I presume, he already is, being of your blood.' 'A gem of rare understanding are you, Marie Louise' said I, 'It will be very difficult to find a husband to match you.' 'Please, please, do believe it is true when I say I do not want any man in that way. I am honestly completely out of tune with all that side of life. We would not be, after all I have passed through?' she said. I put my hand on her head and blessed her.

Next day we rode to my father's house. I was pleased to find things in much better order than on both my previous visits. Alfresun had gone out to his farthest field to see to the clearance of the water-course, and so we were able to inspect the whole place by ourselves and were actually talking to the old steward who kept the accounts, when he arrived. He welcomed me with genuine warmth. His eyes opened wide when I introduced him to Marie Louise. She was dressed in the usual female costume but wore it with a combination of colours and an air all her own. I told him she was a friend who had come to stay with me. We sat down to lunch and by the time it was over, I could see that the two would get on very well together. Alfresun, I discovered, could tell a story wittily, and also had sound business sense. We stayed ten days, the mornings at soldierly exercises and use of arms, the afternoons at estate management, meeting the people, listening to and settling complaints, the evenings to music, singing, fencing, bard recitals and games. I gave him his head generally, just putting in a hint now and again; except of course with the axe, the sword or the knife, when time and again I went through his guard. However he showed no temper and learned steadily, reminding me of my father, who had no particularly brilliant strokes but rolled in the dust many a more brilliant fighter.

One evening his eyes were unusually bright; I wondered what mischief he was going to be up to, and was not too surprised to learn next day that he with ten men had fallen upon a neighbouring village that had, under my lax nephew, been carrying off cattle from our lands for quite some time, had in a tough fight killed six of their guards and brought away fifty head of prime cattle. 'What next?' I asked. 'Peace, if they promise to leave us alone,' he said, 'otherwise watch and fight.' 'Right,' I said, 'restraint befits a warrior

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better than rashness, and remember your house rests on you, don't get killed.' He grinned and answered cheekily. 'Oh greatest of warriors, what said the first Alfresun when surrounded by enemies? The preserver is nearer than the destroyer for us, he cried, and he cut his way out through them all.' 'Aye, he did,' said I, 'and that is why we are still here, you and I, but recollect his skill with weapons was probably much greater than yours. An old woman like me could scarcely have disarmed him.' In accordance with the lessons he was absorbing almost unknowingly from Marie Louise in the evenings, he bowed low and with his hand on his heart said, 'Touche'. The great lady is right. Her servant will spare no pains to improve. Marie Louise, who had just come in, beamed all over her face but said nothing. When we left, he rode to the estate boundary with us, urged me to return as soon as possible, adding 'Please bring her too, for life will be very dull without both of you.'

For the next four years this was the pattern of our lives. After every two months, ten days at my father's house, Alfresun becoming more and more what I had hoped he would be, a true noble, conscious even more of his duties than his rights, a skilled fighter, an able agriculturist, and, so far as we could tell, a decent gentleman, who did no wanton harm to woman or man. When away from Alfresun, I looked after my own affairs, in the handling of which I found Marie Louise very helpful. After a careful examination of my expenditure, she showed me how, without getting rid of a single person or cutting one pension, I could do very well with two-thirds of what I was spending. And she hurt not one functionary's feelings while doing all this. I said to her, 'Dear child, your talents are wasted here. Let me send you with a letter to the King of the North with whom Grey Eyes and I worked. I shall tell him I am sparing you for a year to be comptroller of the Treasury. You will effect remarkable savings and establish order and system. Please agree.' She said, 'Do you want to get rid of me? And are you sure up there they will regard me as an official only and not a woman?' 'You know the answer to the first question very well; you are quite sure I love having you here. Only such skill as yours should be used for the benefit of as many people as possible. That is why I suggested it,' I said. 'As to the second, well, now that I look at you again and see how very attractive you have grown with all our freedom and exercise, no, I don't think any man will be able not to regard you as a woman.

But then you can deal with all that very tactfully and decisively as I have seen on more than one occasion recently. What, blushing?'

'Noblest of women, I am happy here. Let things be. What are kings and kingdoms to us, who live free, even if in a corner,' said she, singing a gazal of Hafiz's in the same strain. As I told you already, she taught my people to make wine from the grape of my northern vineyard. She showed me also her style of eating where you savour one dish at a time, not mixing the flavours of several together, all at the same time, as we do. Three dishes to a meal with the third a sweet, she thought enough, so that I began to think our profusion gross, to the great benefit of my digestion and health. She was company, she was gay, she was wise. People began coming to her for counsel, and always she would make them come to their own decisions, setting out the pros and cons so clearly that all their confusion vanished and they saw what should be done.

However, as with all human felicity, it was too good to last, this life of ours. One day, towards the close of the period, I saw her looking her eyes full of longing, after a handsome third cousin of mine, who had come to call. He was very much married, having two wives already, I saw to it that she got to know this, and was pleased to find her soon her usual cheerful self. But more and more as the days passed, she became full of moods, was often pensive and sighed for no reason. So one day I tackled her. 'Marie Louise,' I said, 'you know yourself, so don't pretend and answer straight. Your aversion to men is over, isn't it? You want a husband, you want to be loved, don't you? Isn't that what has been making you so sad?' In a storm of tears the answer came, 'Khanum, how is it possible to hide anything from you? Forgive me, please forgive me, I am but an animal, not even human, that I long again for what so long degraded me.' 'Nonsense child,' I said, 'you are very human, a lovely woman in the full flower of her maturity and beauty. It is natural you should want love. And we shall see that you have it. Will you let me choose proper suitors for you? I shall present them to you and you can say yes or no. Or have you fallen in love with some one in particular? If so, speak up and I'll try and see about it.' 'No,' she said, 'there's no one in particular.' 'Well,' said I, 'then be patient for a short while longer and try to put up with our usual round.' She fell on her knees and begged to be pardoned.

As I sat at breakfast a few days later, my mother's brother's son, a most arbitrary and monstrous chief, who lived in a bleak northern fort on top of a barren high hill, and bore for some strange reason which I have never known and which no one could tell, the most inappropriate name Firdaus, was announced. In walked a veritable mountain of a man (he stood six inches higher than even myself), clad all in white, and with a twinkle in his very blue eyes, said, 'Ah, ha, Zubeida Khanum, here I am.' 'You are most welcome, dear cousin,' I said, 'and I shall wait breakfast until you have bathed and refreshed yourself. If you will accompany my steward-.' 'Bathed,' he roared, 'bathed. Why I have bathed already? What do you mean? Is this a specimen of your humour? Well, know, that for much less I have thrown to the rocks below...' 'Yes, yes, I know fully your heroic villainies, oh champion,' I said, 'You need not frighten me by reciting them. But tell me, was it necessary after your bath to perfume yourself with rose-water and khus attar and musk all at the same time? So much richness makes me faint, so if you would talk with me, and I assure you, dear cousin, I am only too anxious to listen to you, you must have another bath and come back your simple, unperfumed self. Ho, steward, lead the lord away and give him those special silk robes from the inner closet to change into after his bath. Hurry, there, the lord waits.' Muttering furiously and with many a backward, murderous glance, Firdaus allowed himself to be led away. I had all the windows opened to get rid of the powerful combination of fragrance, and stepped into the garden with a cup of coffee in my hand.

In ten minutes he came back and, his wrath assuaged, helped himself liberally to all the dishes on the table. Then leaning back he shouted, 'Cousin, I want a wife.' 'And I,' said I, 'will want a pair of ear-drums if you shout at me like that. Just try and whisper. We hear quite easily in these parts, you know. Keep your usual tone for your mountain-tops.' 'Oh, all right,' he said, moderating his voice somewhat. 'But I want a wife. My sainted spouse, peace be with her, died three years ago, and I can't live alone any more.' 'So,' I said, 'what?' 'Well,' he said, 'unfortunately you are much older than me, so I can't propose to you. I wish you were younger. You and I would have dealt together excellently.' 'Do you wish perhaps to feel the edge of my axe on your neck?' I asked coldly. 'You are getting very near that now.' 'Now don't take offence,' he

said. 'What I'm saying is true. We're two of a type. But leave that alone. I beseech your help to find me a suitable wife. You are my father's sister's daughter, aren't you ? Do this for me.' 'How long are you staying in these parts ?' I asked. 'Until you get me married,' he said and laughed loud and long as if he had made a great joke.

A thought had been forming at the back of my mind. It was true what he said. He was very like me in many ways, unpolished of course, but basically the same material. He would never let anybody down. If Marie Louise liked me, the woman, and of that I had no doubt, she might get to love him, my male counterpart in a way. And he was undoubtedly an extremely handsome man. I looked round to ask the steward to request Marie Louise to come down, and there in the garden just near the window she stood, her eyes fixed on my cousin in a kind of ecstasy. 'Look,' I said to him in a whisper, 'near that window. What do you think of her ?' He looked and looked, then still looking, actually whispered back, 'What magic is this, Zubeida ? That is not a woman, that is a houri from Paradise. I can never be sufficiently grateful to you, if you give her to me.' 'That depends on her,' I said, 'not on me. Come, I shall make you acquainted.' And leading him to the window I called to Marie Louise and said, 'This is my cousin, miscalled Firdaus. Meet him. He would like to talk to you.' They gazed at one another, their hands got joined somehow and that was all. I walked away. Finding them in the same position ten minutes later, I said, 'Have you both been stuck dumb ? What a peaceful life it will be, this marriage of two mutes. When shall we have the ceremony ?' At that Marie Louise rushed into my arms, while Firdaus mumbled, 'Whenever you like, whenever it is convenient to you.' 'Very well, then,' said I, 'you'll get engaged today a little before lunch, and be married tomorrow evening. A message must go to Alfresun at once, so that he can be here tomorrow. Now, you two, go into the library and get acquainted. My dear child, you don't know what kind of a wild man you are taking on, but since you've been hit by lightning, there's no point in enlarging on that now.'

For the engagement, I made her put on cream silk and her pearl necklace. A sigh went up from the company at her loveliness,—he had got together quite a number of notables to support him—as I led her in. The short ceremony over, we all sat down to lunch. Firdaus

next to me whispered, 'I won't have you ruining yourself for my wife. That necklace, my God, you mustn't do it. 'It's hers,' I said, 'not mine.' 'But who is she then, some Royal Princess ?' he asked. 'Who she is doesn't matter, but if you don't treat her at least as well as if she were a Royal Princess, I, though no longer General of the North-East, will lay siege to your fort and leave it a mass of rubble. Remember that,' I said in so fierce a voice that he literally quailed and Marie Louise, who was sitting on my other side, put her hand on my knees.

Alfresun came in next day, both glad and sorry, and demanded of Marie Louise, 'Why couldn't you wait ? I was just plucking up courage to ask you, and now you've gone and thrown yourself away on the savage.' 'Why, you boy,' she mocked, smiling at him. He smiled back and wished her the best of luck. For the marriage I dressed her in dark blue and made her wear her diamond necklace and emerald earrings and bracelets. A wonderful figure she made, her every movement a quivering of exquisite lights. And so, as the couple departed into the darkness, and the guests left, I mentioned to Alfresun for the first time the question of his own marriage.

## XVI

'There is time, time and to spare, great aunt,' said Alfresun, 'I have just begun to feel I know something now about the proper running of the land. I am getting quite high yields even from fields which were considered almost unfit for cultivation. The sheep in that dip on the other side of the river are, I am told, the best for wool in this whole tract. No one has dared to raid us for over a year and not a chicken is stolen from any farmhand's yard. All this does not come about, as you know very well, without constant attention. My mind is always full of things to do, matters to be attended to, people to be encouraged or punished. I really have no time for domestic felicity. I fall asleep the moment my head touches my pillow and am

on horseback within ten minutes of my eyes opening in the morning. So, dearest benefactress, let us wait,' and he began to sing the saint-poet's verses,

Good it is in good time to be wed,
Too late, too sad; too early, alas !

'Well,' said I, 'I will raise the matter again in six months' time, and meanwhile I shall look around. There is some point in what you say, but you have no brothers, remember, and the line must go on.' He smiled and bowing low bade me good night, for he would have to leave early in the morning.

"Much tedium I bore in the next six months, visiting households in which there were marriageable daughters, and spending most of my time with the women. It was said of me then, I was told, that at last in my old age I had become really female, interested in recipes, embroidery, social small talk, genealogies and family ties. How bored I used to get at times and how carefully I preserved appearances and seemed interested. Not for several princes' ransoms would I go through such a period again. But I found my candidate, a cousin's grand-daughter, strong, healthy, attractive, endowed with commonsense and the capacity to face up to situations that the wife of a man like my great-nephew would need. I thought I would not mind telling her about my brother and his son as my old nurse had suggested, and I felt I could rely on her never to let Alfresun know she knew. She had a cool head, that girl, and her management of her testy father and rather incompetent mother aroused my respect. I took her out riding twice and found her pleasant and sensible company.

"Thus fully prepared, on my next visit to Alfresun's, one evening as we sat alone, I told him about her. No, no, he said, he knew her. She used to visit them as a girl and she was a proper minx, would lie quite coolly and get others in trouble. Not for him, no, please. I argued with him, but his mind was made up, so I said, 'Well, choose for yourself or let me tell you of some others I have seen.' No, he would not, he was not in love with anyone and he would rather wait until he loved. Well, I have great respect for true love, but I consider duty paramount. He, moreover, was not even in love, and his duty was to have a son or two, to keep his line alive. Was a thousand years of history to be reduced to nought, because he felt

he would not love the woman he would hold in his arms and father his child on? 'Do your duty, Sir,' I said, 'and God willing, all else, even love, will be added to it.' But he was adamant. For seven days I argued with him every evening, always unsuccessfully. He had no argument against; he would admit the strength of my plea, but he just could not yield. And every day a deeper depression overcame me. In that old home of my childhood, almost I could see my mother, and step-mother and father looked at me and sadly shaking *their heads, as if I had failed them. And I had. There was* no point in continuing there. So on the eighth morning, I gave him best and formally broke off all contact with him. Since when, I haven't seen him or had anything to do with him. Marie Louise, who came to me to have her first child—a bonny brave boy who gravely stared at me when I first took him in my arms and made no sign of concern at all—tried several times to intervene on his behalf. Finally I was sharp with her and asked did she think I was in the wrong in urging him as I had done. No, she said, it was obvious, in view of *the danger to which he must be* exposed quite often, that he should marry and secure the line. But still, I was his nearest relative and he felt greatly the estrangement from me. 'Let him,' said I, 'and let us have no more talk about him. A man who puts fancy notions above his duty is not the man for me.' And now, you have thrust me right in the middle of his affairs again."

"I am sorry indeed," said the Assistant Collector "to have incommoded you, but you see, Zoe Banoo, he is now trying to do what *you wanted him to do, marry.* No longer is he in opposition to your desire, he is anxious that it is fulfilled. Should you decide to help him it will be quite as much in furtherance of your wishes as of his." Zubeida Khanum laughed and quoted "He reconcileth the opposed by sharing the victory between them; by his skill none is overthrown, all prosper." "Well, the whole position is before you now. Think well and decide. Consider not just state policies but also the futures of individuals. Would you let a close relative, a sister, a niece, take the risk Roumela must take, if she enters into this marriage? And remember, *she can be told nothing.*" "*I do not envy you your thoughts to*night, for that you are a man of conscience is evident. When do we meet tomorrow?" And she got to her feet. "At 8.30, noble lady," said the Assistant Collector. "The angels guard your slumbers," and he walked with her to the tent-door. There she stopped him, took

his hand, shook it like a man, and said, "No, don't trouble about me any more. You have had a hard and weary day, and for aught I know, may have a difficult and soul-searching night before you. So, the Lord protect you and make easy your travails." The Assistant Collector stood looking after her as with long smooth strides she disappeared, a small company behind her, the Naik lighting her path with the lamp in his hand. The old legends were not all false, he thought. Here truly was a daughter of the gods, divinely tall and even taking into account her years, most divinely fair. With that all the weariness of the world seemed to overcome him, so that, dropping his clothes haphazard on the side room carpet, he tumbled into bed and before his head had even touched the pillow, was asleep.

Since there was to be no field-inspection, Dhanji gave him an extra hour next morning and waited till seven before taking in his tea. So sound asleep he seemed that, tray in hand, Dhanji backed out, to be confronted by the Naik, who said with a frown, "Still asleep? Go on, wake him up or if you are too kind-hearted to, give me the tray." A chuckle came from the side-room and a voice, "No, keep that stone heart out. I can't face him until I've had my tea.' Dhanji and the Naik smiled at one another. The new day had begun and not at all badly. The Assistant Collector, having run round the camping-ground half-a-dozen times, taken his hot bath and eaten a hearty breakfast, was at his desk, when at eight-thirty exactly in walked Zubeida Khanum, and making no answer to the Assistant Collector's salutation, simply said, "Well?" Suiting his mood to hers, the Assistant Collector, equally curtly answered, "If at all possible, the marriage must take place." "Why?" she demanded. "Because otherwise they will elope, a feud will start, many will be killed, they will be dead or fugitives even you might get involved. On the one side the misery, even the death of one woman, if the worst possible happens—and it well may not, for there is yet no reason to suspect your great-nephew will follow your brother or nephew's path—on the other, all that. It isn't even a question of choice, the answer is automatic once the probabilities are stated. Does your ladyship agree? For many long moments there was no answer. Then slowly, "Yes. It's evident you must go ahead. Did you think it out through the night?" "No," said the Assistant Collector, "soundly I slept all night I must confess. Only this morning at breakfast it struck me in all its starkness, and I saw there was nothing else to do.'

Slowly the lady smiled "Ah, it need the sight and smell of good food to bring your mind to a point. Truly you are properly suited to our food-enjoying nature. But I congratulate you on the equanimity of your temperament. I wasted a lot of sympathy on you as I pictured you struggling with your thoughts all night." "Now truly do I know why sleep was so beautiful," said the Assistant Collector. "I am indeed greatly indebted to that sympathy."

"Enough of this," said the Khanum. "Since you are determined to go ahead with this project, and since when all is said and done, Alfresun is still my great-nephew, such help as I can give I must give. You want me to make the offer on your behalf?" "And on yours, most noble. Or rather, on your behalf and on mine, to put *it in its proper order, you as representing* the ancient and famous family, to which you have added no little lustre yourself, and I as being in **loco parentis** in my official position to all in need of the protection of that status, and especially to so fine a young man as *your great-nephew, the best fighter, the best agriculturist of this* territory, reliable, loyal, honest, in brief, a paragon, who does the greatest credit to his country and his family." "Well, well," said the Khanum, "you certainly are appreciative. We had better have all that in writing, so that *I can remember it in detail when I make* the formal proposal. But let's proceed bit by bit. I make the proposal. But since you are not of the family and I make it also on your behalf, which of course carries the real weight, you or your representatives must be with me when *I* make it. You obviously cannot be, for if you were and they hesitated for say half-an-hour, you would have to make them change their minds, axe in hand. That will not be obligatory on your representatives. Now, who will you send? There must be two."

"Will you permit me a little consultation?" said the Assistant Collector, and as she nodded, raising his voice, "Mohamed Khan, would you kindly come in and also ask Pribhdasji to trouble to come over." When both had entered and bowed low to the Khanum, who returned their greetings cheerfully, the Assistant Collector said, "The most noble lady has agreed to make the offer on her behalf and ours; for which I am sure you will be as grateful to her as I am. Now the question arises, as she must have two representatives of ours with her, who shall they be? What say you, Pribhdasji?"

"Truly are we all rejoiced that her ladyship has consented to conduct this mission of peace and joy, and on all our behalfs I would thank her, if I may," said Pribhdas. "As to representatives, why, Sir, the most suitable would be the heads of your official and your private households Mohamed Khan here and Dhanji." The Assistant Collector looked at the Naik, who said, "That is in accord with custom, but her ladyship will know best." "Why, certainly," said the Khanum, "admirably settled. Both of them make a very brave show, and Mohamed Khan is in addition a distant connection of ours. Yes, we shall ride together, shall we not, most admirable of butlers, and their wills will crumple at the very sight of us, will they not?" Dhanji who had entered with coffee, presented the tray, and not knowing what had gone before, said with perfect non-chalance, "As your ladyship pleases." Keeping her face serious with an effort, the Khanum took the cup, while the Assistant Collector explained to Dhanji what had been suggested and asked if he had any objection. "None at all, Sir," was the answer, "except of course that you will not be looked after for as many as three days. Both I and the Naik away, not very good, that." "Come, come," said the Assistant Collector, "I'll manage though of course not so well, still don't let that trouble you. Now, if you gentlemen will permit, we shall get on with the other details."

"Excellent," said the Khanum when all three had withdrawn, "I, who have seen much government in many places, and have done not a little governing myself, I sincerely congratulate you. This works the true leader, for whom men willingly come forward to do what he would otherwise have to order them to do. Such a man is always well-served and deserves to be." "You are much too kind, Zoe Banoo. I only did what occurred to me. There was no thought behind my asking them," said the Assistant Collector. "Aye, that's right, the true leader, I said; I'll amend it, the born leader. Can you deny these three men or many others who work with you would die for you? In honesty you can't, that's what I mean." "God give them all long life," said the Assistant Collector, "and you to whom men's hearts are as open book, life and health and strength and serenity for ever. But the other point, or you will not reach your halting-place in time." "Well, representatives, done. Now they can't go empty-handed, a full dress for the girl, the usual jewels, if possible, all in a silver or gold worked tray,

and plenty of sweetmeats and fruit for the visited family and servants, that comes next," said the Khanum. Unlocking the box on his desk, the Assistant Collector took out all the notes that were there and put them on the table near her. "There's only six hundred there," he said, "I hope it will do for the clothes, sweets and fruit." The Khanum looked at him intently for a long minute then said, "And what is the princely salary the benign Government bestows monthly on you?" "Why, exactly that, lady, but..." "But, nothing," said the Khanum. "I will take a hundred, for it is fitting that the girl's headcloth should be the gift of the boy's father. That will cost about seventy and the balance will do for the sweets. For the rest, I have enough brocades and silks for many a wedding laid away and shall use some of them. Come, no argument, pick up that money and give me a nice, new, lucky hundred-rupee note with your own hand, so that all may go well with this mission."

The Assistant Collector did as directed, then with the five hundred still in his hand extended it. "But the jewellery. Won't you need this?" "No extravagant lord, I will not, for I shall take no ornaments. I shall take only this." And from inside her dress the Khanum took out a marvellous ruby, emerald and sapphire necklace and spread it on the table. "Splendour of God," murmured the Assistant Collector, "a man might easily count life well lost for this," and he gazed enraptured at the beauty of the stones and the exquisite workmanship. "Yes, said the lady, many a man must have lost his life for it" and the last 'who owned it' I killed with my own hands in fair fight. We met in a charge, rendered weaponless both by the previous fighting, and as he grappled with me, my grip round his neck tightened and before I knew it I was carrying him along dead. I would have dropped him, but I saw something glitter round his neck and so held on till the other side of the field. Then still holding him I humped off my horse, saw the necklace as I let my victim fall and in a trice it was in my pocket. Had Grey Eyes been alive, I would have worn it for him. But this was some years after his death and so no male eye, nay, no eye at all save mine, has seen it till today. I have kept it on my person or in a very safe, secret place. Tell me, do you think Roumeja's parents will be satisfied?" "They will be insane if they are not. But please, Zoe Banoo, will you not put it away? My eyes keep on going back to it and I can scarcely think, its glory so fills the brain," said the

Assistant Collector. "Yes, it has that effect to begin with, but it is a friendly piece really. It does the wearer no harm, gives confidence rather," said the Khanum. "You will miss it very much, won't you?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes, I'm afraid I will, still have but one male heir Alfresun, and since I am doing this I may as well do it well, in true Zubeida fashion, as they used to say in the kingdom of the North. So, now, all is settled. I won't go on to my visit, but will go back home. On the third day from today I shall start out with my cavalcade for the proposing. Your two representatives had better spend the night before at my place, so that we can leave around eight. The most courteous hour for a proposing party is a little afternoon. By that time the household chores are over, everybody has eaten well, and people are in the right mood for discussion and argument, so we'll try and get there around 12.30. If all goes well, we'll be there for a day or two, in any case the Naik on return will give you all the details. And, if necessary, I shall venture to drop in too on my co-sponsor. Well, now that you have got me into this, you may give my love to Alfresun when you see him next, and tell him I shall expect a visit from him as soon as possible. And if all goes well, an early marriage, by the end of the month, yes?" "You know much more about all this than I do," said the Assistant Collector, "and I have the fullest faith in your judgment, so let all things be as you will." "Oh, no, I take blanket responsibility like that. Yours has been the initiative, yours must be the agreement to individual decisions. Yes?" "Certainly, Zoe Banoo. To any point you raise, this humble mind will be applied," smiled the Assistant Collector. And he called in the Naik and Dhanji to receive their instructions directly from the lady.

This having been done, Dhanji produced some dry sherry and biscuits and sandwiches, saying it was fitting the lady should partake of some refreshment before she undertook the journey home. "In view of the satisfactory conclusion of this stage of this undoubtedly arduous affair," said the Khanum, "your suggestion is very welcome." She moved over to the Assistant Collector's long canvas-chair, and raising her glass proposed a toast to success, with which said the Assistant Collector be associated the name of the ever victorious general and most generous lady, Zubeida Khanum. Both sipped their sherry and munched their biscuits in silence and then Zubeida Khanum said, "Supposing after all I had said no, I will not have

anything to do with it. What would you have done?" Said the Assistant Collector, "Why go into that now?" She persisted, "But I would like to know." "Well," said the Assistant Collector, "Pribhdas, Mohamed Khan and Alfresun convinced me that my going would be tantamount to suicide and would involve some of their lives too, so I would not have gone. But while you were speaking earlier, I glimpsed a ray of hope. You mentioned Marie Louise and her intervention on behalf of Alfresun. So perhaps as a last chance, I might have tried to get her to take a hand," said the Assistant Collector. "So, you were thinking up a second line, I might have known it," said the Khanum. "Not consciously, dear lady, not consciously at all, but you know how it is, we who are accustomed to affairs, almost without willing, think of options. The best, you; but if not the best, what? Give up. Not unless everything at all possible has been tried, not when so much is at stake. Forgive me, but with you, I cannot be less than frank," said the Assistant Collector. "Nor with anyone else, I should think," said the Khanum, "for while you have an agreeable tongue and a shrewd head, there is no guile in you at all. The intriguer just wouldn't understand you and in that perhaps is your greatest strength. So continue to be frank, dervish, and aim straight at what you think it right to aim at, and God willing, you will rarely miss the very heart of the target."

Zubeida Khanum rose, looked all round the tent-room, shook hands and with 'God protect you' moved out to where her horse stood. With a bound she was in the saddle; a wave of her hand and she was gone. "A most formidable personage," said the learned Pribhdas. "A statesman and soldier of the highest calibre," commented the brave Mohamed Khan. "Undoubtedly a great one, easy to serve if you serve rightly," was Dhanji's view. "The ideally wonderful woman," muttered the Assistant Collector as he turned back to the tent and suggested to the sheristedar that they might use the rest of the morning to get rid of several general matters that had come for opinion and the questionnaires from two recently appointed committees. When the papers were brought in, he was intoning to himself in a low voice,

A perfect woman, nobly planned
To warn, to comfort and command.

"What, Sir?" asked Pribhdas. "No, nothing," said the Assistant Collector. "About this suggested amendment of the Criminal Procedure Code, it will make work more difficult, for..."

## XVII

The morning of the third day after Zubeida Khanum's departure found the Assistant Collector on foot in a field intermediate between the camp he had just left and the camp he was going to, surrounded by an eager, gesticulating crowd of landholders and their tenants, complaining that they were not getting enough water from the newly-widened watercourse, that had supplied enough before it became silted and had to be cleared. The water was there, nay more water than before, but each was not getting his fair share. Somebody was doing them down, who they could not say, but somebody obviously was, and they looked with dark suspicion at one another. A few minutes more, thought the Assistant Collector, and traditional enmities will begin to assert themselves; a push, an axe-blow, a head severed, and all their frustration and anger they will wash away in a real free-for-all. Result, a score at least killed, one and a half times that wounded, before commonsense reasserts itself.

In a loud voice he said, "Gentlemen, when all talk, none hears. So silence please, and since our purpose is peaceful settlement much can be won by the edge of the axe, we all know, but not equitable sharing of water among half-hundred holdings,—all fall back six feet from me, laying your axes and daggers down where you stand now. Once you are all seated in a circle round me, we'll see who steals this water that is there and that no one gets. Vampires drink men's blood, tales tell; perhaps you have a new kind of vampire, one that slakes its thirst on your blood for drinking up your irrigation-water, and so starving your crops. Know you of such a demon in these parts?" Slowly laying down their weapons, the men fell back and sat down, the frowns wiped off their faces, some smiling broadly. The Assistant Collector took from his pocket the distribution-list, according to

which the water was to be shared hour by hour for the whole week among the various holdings, and read it out slowly and deliberately. "This, you all accepted and accept, I believe. Or are any dissatisfied with it?" "No, no, it is proper," was the general comment. "Now through day, and even more important, night is this list adhered to? Can you be sure?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes," was the reply, "for the last three weeks we have had special watches kept at night to see all keep strictly to their times." "Well, then, there's only one thing to do. Let's follow the watercourse from head to foot, watching carefully for any unauthorised outlet," said the Assistant Collector. "Lord, it is rough country and you are on foot. May we..." interposed one of the older holders. "On, on," cried the Assistant Collector "Thanks for your consideration, but what has been begun, must be ended. So, forward and let your eyes look keenly."

For a mile and a half they went along the watercourse, some on one side, some on the other, then suddenly the Assistant Collector stopped, and said to a young man, "Will you kindly strip and jump into the water at this spot?" and when he had done so, "Look, right in the middle the water is upto his nipples. Yes? Now out. No, don't trouble to clothe yourself. Run with us until I stop," and twenty yards further down, "Jump again and stop in the middle. Ah, there it is, the water is only upto his abdomen. Well, between these spots is your vampire, friends. Has anyone a detailed map of this area?" A teacher who also held land said, "Here is a very old one I have, lord, all folded up. It shows my fields, too." "Good, thank you," said the Assistant Collector and looking at it closely, "God be praised, and praised too be your ancestor who made this careful sketch, learned teacher. See here is the clear marking of an underground channel opening. It is about five yards upstream from us. I should think. Two more to strip please, and come forward. Into the water, all three, and crawl slowly up from this spot in single file feeling for an opening on the right bank about four feet below the surface. Yes, go on." The young men moved up feeling their way. Suddenly the leader stopped, seemed to sit down and disappear below the surface, and a few moments later came up spluttering and gasping and trying to speak all at the same time. "Easy, easy," said the Assistant Collector, seizing him by the arm and helping him out of the water. "Now, quiet, lie flat, get your breath back and then talk." After a couple of minutes, the young man stood up and said, "Quite a big entrance and the watering

pouring into it with force; completely open, so that it must be draining away all the twenty-four hours." A hum arose from the crowd, turning into a roar of indignation. "Stop that outlet, temporarily now, and this afternoon permanently, with bricks and mortar and whatever else is necessary. You know how?" "Yes, lord, rest assured it will be done, by tonight no water will flow that way," said the oldest of those present, and already in fact branches were being cut, earth pits being dug, and other preparations afoot.

"Fortunate the moment at which we saw you on the road this dawn, lord. Truly are you the solver of problems and the giver of peace. We were all getting very tense over this loss of water, for to us who live by the land what is water but the blood of life? Had you not shown us how to save this life-blood, God alone knows how much other blood would have been shed! But I chatter. You will honour our humble abode and break a crust of bread, before you proceed, lord?" "With pleasure, and while there, I hope we shall be able to get to the inwardness of this business too. How came that disused channel to be reopened and who profited from it?" "No good can come by talking of that, for far beyond our reach is the moving cause; even beyond your mighty power, lord, for the Sirkar has no grip where he lives. He is wise, so he will bear this closing up of his stolen water-supply, but to try to call him to account would be to take a most untimely trip to Paradise. No, more than enough you have done, leave the rest to the Master of all things and all men." On further inquiry over buttermilk and hot **parathas**, the Assistant Collector learned that the culprit was an independent chief, who lived in a hill-fort ten miles away but had recently built a big summer-house, surrounded by a large garden, three miles from where they were. He was there at the moment with his family or some part of it, and always had a guard of about fifty fierce tribesmen with him.

Having eaten his fill and thanked his host profusely, the Assistant Collector stepped into the open place before the house. "I thought I was just walking in my next camp ten miles away, so I have neither my men with me nor my weapons. Would you kindly show me a **lorh** or two and perhaps a few pairs of daggers, so that I could borrow for a short while something suitable," he said to the men assembled there to greet him. Out of a dozen **lorhs** that soon appeared, he

selected one that suited his grip and by-passing the more costly daggers chose two simple, black scabbarded sharp blades. Then turning to the crowd he said, "And now I want four young warriors to accompany me to a man-eater's lair, single, so that per adventure, no widows may have to weep, with many brothers, so that neither should parents be left unconsolable nor families become extinct, in case they do not return." As he ceased speaking, twelve men moved forward. Viewing them carefully the Assistant Collector chose four. Brave they all were bound to be, so he looked for brains, restraint and presence. To the four he said, "Now friends, in an hour we leave. Meanwhile prepare yourselves as for a feast, bodies well-bathed, beards well curled, dress black or red, tied elaborately, axes to suit you and daggers or a belt of knives, whichever you prefer. We meet here."

Then turning to the elder who had been his host, he said, "Venerable, you look reproachful so I must explain. It is not out of bravado that I am taking young men into danger. Think, had you found the outlet yourself and closed it, this chief might have put up with it, waiting for another occasion to reopen it quietly. But now he is bound to know I was concerned and will he then leave you alone? Will he not feel you were ganging up with authority against him and so must be taught a severe lesson ? You are very remote. Supposing he rides in with two hundred men one night, it might well take a month before the raid was heard of down south. So with your fine young men as the stakes, I gamble. As I told you before, what has been begun must be ended." "I follow, lord, even in a village there has to be leadership, and one who had led, can sometimes read leaders' hearts. You don't say you gamble with your own life, but of course you do so much more than with anyone else's. And your reading of the situation is correct. All our lives depend on you, so..." "So, the lord will protect if he thinks us worthwhile," said the Assistant Collector bursting into the saint-poet's song beginning

A bubble on the ocean of Time,
And yet man lives,

and ending

Glory then to the doer
And glory to his Lord.
Magnanimity, of all virtues the king,
Is the final prize to the brave.

Many a voice joined in and the three choruses could not have been bettered in far more sophisticated circles. Thus in light-heartedness and good cheer, a quarter of an hour before noon, the five walked out of the village.

Covering the three miles at an easy pace, they entered the garden-gates, which were open. To the sentries who held them up, the Assistant Collector said, "Hearing of your chief's magnificent new establishment, we come to see its wonders and to greet him. In peace we come, as you can see from our dress and the way we trail our weapons." "Peace be with you," said the officer in charge, "if you hurry you may still find them at table and be able to join in." The dishes were being removed as they entered the main hall in a small procession, the Assistant Collector a little in front, and the four behind, two by two in exact line, all walking at a measured pace. Three steps away from the dais on which the chief, a very big, strong man with a ruthless and rather brutal face, was seated, the Assistant Collector halted, then raising his right hand said, "Peace be with you." The chief looked at him ponderingly, frowned, then returned the greeting curtly and added, "What brings you and these popinjays here?" "Great chief," said the Assistant Collector, "in peace we come to accuse you of theft and demand reparation." "God in Heaven," swore the chief, "tear their clothes away from the fellows, tie them naked, and we'll see what a few strokes on their soles will cause them to say. Even to impudence there must be some limit." The Assistant Collector gestured, and the four men and he made a complete small circle, all facing outwards, weapons at the ready. "Chief," said the Assistant Collector, "how many do you want killed ? Twenty at least we shall dispose of for you and be sure a dagger in your heart or a knife in your gullet will take you to Hell, before we ascend to Heaven. Has your food so disagreed with you that you want bloodshed in your own hall ? You have stolen our water, you have robbed us of food. Repay, repay," and in union the four men roared after him, "Repay, repay."

The chief had seized his axe and was about to rush down from the dais, when a hand touched his shoulder and a voice spoke in his ear. As he stopped and listened, the Assistant Collector laid his **lorh** on the ground and made a very deep obeisance to the figure

veiled from head to foot who stood beside the chief. "Why do you bow with such reverence?" asked the chief in an astounded voice, his terrible wrath of a minute ago retreating into the background. "Who should not bow most reverently," said the Assistant Collector, "when Heaven itself opens its gates and gives him a glimpse of its glory?" A movement shook the veiled figure. "Are you a necromancer, a looker into the future? Speak quickly, I have need of one," demanded the chief. "Neither am I, though occasionally a seer of visions," said the Assistant Collector. "Anyhow, come, come at once," said the chief. "Your men will be safe till you return, though our quarrel still remains, remember," and to his people, "Let these men rest on that bench against the wall, but give them neither bread nor water. We still have to deal with them," and with a horrible sneer, "with their leader, too." The Assistant Collector handed over his lorh to one of his companions, unbuckled the belt with the two daggers and handed it over to another saying "Remain, God maketh all well." Then bowed again to the veiled figure and said, "Your commands?" Quickly it entered another room, the Assistant Collector following, the chief behind him. On it went to the other end of the house where on the floor lay a young girl of about twelve, moaning, rocking from side to side and occasionally shrieking. Gesturing towards her, the figure stopped, then trembled as if about to fall and held on to the chief's arm to steady herself.

The Assistant Collector, down on his knees by the girl, felt her pulse, had a faint notion it wasn't unusually quick, put his hand on her forehead, was sure there was no high fever, then as she prepared to shriek, clamped his hand on her mouth. After a moment her struggles ceased, and her eyes, hitherto closed, opened. They seemed quite normal, so still with his hand on her mouth, the Assistant Collector intoned the first prayers of his faith. A look of ordinary curiosity came into the eyes. God be praised, said the Assistant Collector fervently to himself, and suddenly he slapped her quickly and lightly thrice on each cheek. With a normal school girl howl, she sat up, calling loudly for her mother. Dropping her veil completely in her hurry, the mother took the girl in her arms, patting and comforting her, while the chief took the Assistant Collector by the arm and nearly shook it off, shouting joyously in his ear, "You have cured her. You have cured her. Well done." "Control your joy, chief, and give praise to God. He has been good to your daughter, your wife

and you and specially good to me," said the Assistant Collector. "Well, now tell us what to do if this happens again. It may and we shall go distracted." "Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "there are some matters no curer can discuss in the presence of the patient or with her male parent. If you will take your daughter into the next room, I shall mention a few relevant points to the lady of the house. You may watch us talking, if you like, so long as you do not hear." "Dervish, for you cannot be less, I shall do as you say." And saying to the lady, "Listen to the dervish," the chief took the girl into the corridor.

Quickly the lady came forward and taking a seat by the Assistant Collector's side said, "Brother of my heart!" "You felt it then," said the Assistant Collector, "so did I, as of somebody I had known and been very fond of for years, years and years ago. In some previous life perhaps, dearest of sisters. You know of course that you are very lovely and with a purity of expression that must be unrivalled. How came you into this menage?" "It is too long a story to tell, but I'm not unhappy. He is a kind husband, my daughter is a delight and perhaps I shall have a son," said the lady. "There is nothing wrong with your girl, you know. If she tries another of these fits, just spank her. Also less rich food and plenty of exercise. Why don't you and she both ride every day an hour or two? You're not likely to become fat, but think of what a tragedy any alteration in your wondrous profile would be. It is a pity you live in a world where the world can't see you. Otherwise a new cult would start around you," said the Assistant Collector. "Dear, dear brother," murmured the lady and putting her hands on his, turned to her husband to say, "He finds nothing wrong with our daughter or with me that a couple of hours on horseback a day will not cure. But what about you?" "I shall talk to the chief by himself, lady," said the Assistant Collector. "Now farewell, God protect you and keep you happy and well. Never again are we likely to meet, but the meetings of memory who can prevent?"

Bowing very low, he walked out of her presence, accompanied by the chief, who almost instantly demanded, "Shall I have a son? I want one badly." "You will," said the Assistant Collector, "if you give your unique wife the respect and affection that are her due, and go no more to the light ladies you visit." "How do you know?

How did you know? Truly you must be a necromancer. I keep it very secret," said the chief in a low voice. "As secret as your addiction to bhang, I suppose," said the Assistant Collector. "No, I have no secret knowledge. Your face, your gait, they show what you are. If you want advice, here it is. Give up lechery completely, cut down on your potations. Then you may live to see a son grow up. Otherwise I see nothing for you in a few years except lying like a hulk on your bed, utterly paralysed and longing for death, unless of course a kindly axe severs your neck earlier in battle. Don't look so pale, chief, your fate is in your own hands, and by your side God has placed a denizen from paradise to help you."

"Yes, yes, that is true," said the chief. "Well, what shall I give you for your service? Some bags of gold, I have also two fine diamond necklaces. Choose any you like or take both." "God in Heaven, man, where did you grow up," said the Assistant Collector, "that you offer a person like me gold and jewels? Let me have from you the gold of good behaviour, of decent treatment of your fellow men, the jewels of non-oppression and assistance to the poor and the weak. That's all." "Yes, certainly," said the chief, thoroughly cowed, "I'll do what you say. I'll be just and kind and fair to all. Yes, I'll give you and your men a hundred bags of the best wheat as reparation for the water I took, all right stole, and I won't trouble them again. Now I hope that's all right, considering I took the water only for two and half weeks." "Well, it 'll do," said the Assistant Collector, "but you'll have to lend us the animals to carry them away on. They'll all be returned to you tomorrow." "Good, that's arranged then. Now come and feast, your men must be starved too," said the chief.

Their return to the hall brought great relief to the Assistant Collector's companions. While they were all eating, the grain was loaded on to the animals, and as soon as the meal was over, the Assistant Collector, gathering his men together, made a speech of thanks, bowing low to the Sirdar, and asking for all Heaven's blessings on his family and him, for he had hearkened to justice and fulfilled the utmost demands of neighbourliness. At which, the chief, for the first time in his life, admitted he had swindled his neighbours and hoped they would forgive him. With much applause was this greeted and the Assistant Collector with a quick final fare-

well started the procession home. As he waited alone at the end, to let the dust settle a little, the chief came rushing up and said, "You never told me your name ? I don't think you live in this village. Where do you ?" The Assistant Collector smiled and with a deep bow said, "You see before you the servant of the laws, whom men address as lord." "Splendour of God," said the chief, "if I thought all the sirkar's servants were like you, I wouldn't mind becoming its subject myself." "Long may you flourish in independence, sirdar," said the Assistant Collector, "and should you ever venture into our territory, do not forget I shall expect you to dinner. God protect you," and he started on the trudge to the village.

Reaching there, his first anxiety was about the sending back of the pack-animals. The elder at whose house he had breakfasted that morning said they had all been unloaded and as soon as they and their attendants had rested a little would be on their way back. The village was on fete. It seemed to it a miracle had been achieved by the Assistant Collector and while his praise of the superb bearing and behaviour of their fellow-villagers who had accompanied him, pleased them, they had not the least intention of letting the Assistant Collector diminish his part in the affair. His emphasis on the sense of justice and ready acknowledgement of error by the chief were just disregarded. At last he said, "Well, friends, farewell. My men must have given me up for lost and several search parties are probably starting. The petitioners for the day will also be inconvenienced. So I must press on. Lend me a horse someone. I promise to return it as faithfully as you do the chief's pack-animals." At which there was a great burst of laughter. Soon the best horse in the place was forthcoming and the Assistant Collector set off at as quick a pace as possible. It was only when nearing his camp that the thought struck him that this too had been the day of Zubeida Khanum's mission. He hoped Providence had favoured her as much as it had him, and wondered what she would say if she knew the inside story of his day's doings.

## XVIII

Long and weary were the tales that day, thought the Assistant Collector, who had started on petitions the moment he reached the camp, as he listened patiently to twenty complainants and passed orders, sometimes in detail, sometimes with just a word or quip. As the twenty-first stepped into the circle of light from the lamp on the small table at the Assistant Collector's side,—twilight had gone and it was beginning to be dark—his interest revived. "Lord," said a dignified old man, his finely chiselled face showing great strain, "I seek your help. My eldest son has been arrested for murder. He did not commit it. I cannot prove that he did not; you can. Not in your jurisdiction do we live, but on the other side of the river, and my son is lodged in the lock-up of the small town three miles from the river." "And the murdered man?" asked the Assistant Collector. "His lands marched with mine," said the old man, "about two miles from the river." "Surely then, friend," said the Assistant Collector, "your appeal for help should be to the authority of your own tract, not to me. He no doubt will consider it most carefully.

"My cry to you, lord," said old zemindar, "is not to the ruler but to the man. Because you are you I come to you. I do not expect you to act in your official capacity. All I ask is, find out the truth, go into the matter. I know my son did not kill this man, but if you after enquiry say he did, he shall plead guilty. I am seventy now, lord; never of my house—we have been here over four hundred years—has any killed save in fair fight, and now they accuse my son of breaking into this man's house in the middle of the night and ripping open his belly as he slept with his leman beside him. And all for what? Some hot words exchanged with some of our men over our cattle that had strayed into his fields and our men had got away again before he could impound them. They don't even say my son was there, but they found by the dead man's side a knife

they say belonged to my son, and so he lies in jail handcuffed and I am told by my advisers, I must hire lawyers and get false witnesses who knowing nothing will be prepared to swear my son was with them ten miles away that night. I listened to them all last evening. This dawn as I turned to the West, the thought came to me of you and you seemed to stand before me and smile kindly. So here I am, lord, your supplicant," and the old man crossed his arms across chest and bowed low.

"Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "of your house I have heard, and of you too. Would the occasion were more gladsome on which I made your acquaintance, for I have heard of you as one who keeping all the virtues of past ages, add to them the tolerance and moderation of these times. Officially I cannot even appear in this affair, but effort necessary to clear it up shall be undertaken. Give Pribhdasji here a detailed statement of all you know and answer fully any questions he asks and then depart in peace. You will learn the result in good time, God willing." Calling out a blessing, the old man left with the sheristedar.

The Assistant Collector, having no more petitioners turned into the tent and lying back in his canvas-chair, sipped the long drink Anwar Khan, the Naik's first Assistant, presented. "Your bath is ready, Sir," said Anwar after ten minutes. "Good, thank you," said the Assistant Collector. Oh the joy of that hot water on his tired skin and muscle, after a whole day of effort and striving. "H'm, H'm," coughed Anwar from outside, "you will forgive me, but Dhanji specially told me not to let you relax too long in the cooling water. Dinner will be ready in five minutes and your sherry stands ready poured on the side-table, Sir." "Right," said the Assistant Collector. Scrambling out of the tub and towelling himself down vigorously he slipped into fresh clothes and sipping the sherry sat down at the single-piece folding camp dining-table. As he finished his delicious tomato-soup, a whispering of voices fell on his ears.

"Come in, Pribhdasji," he said, "come in." And when he had entered, "Draw up that chair and sit down. Well?" "First of all, Sir, I must protest. In fact all of the staff officers in camp here, the Head Munshi, the 2nd Head Clerk and I, we all protest most

emphatically." Said the Head Munshi to me, the Head Clerk nodding approval, 'I would say this to him myself, but he must be at his dinner and that is no time for deputations. Please tell him that this is beyond all bearing. He has got into a most terrific mess over the Alfresun business and we are all in it with him, not just because we work under him, but because we have affection for him and cannot be indifferent to his welfare. How that most dangerous business will end, no one knows, very probably disastrously with a full-scale feud which he will have to try and suppress at the risk of his life and all our lives. Well, the will of God perhaps, I said. But now, because of a pitiful old man's piteous appeal to undertake this investigation business without even the protection of his official position and its appertenances, to become a *private individual* and end up probably in an unknown ditch with a dagger through his heart or an axe through his skull, really it is difficult to be patient. Lord, men call him, but has not even the Lord God responsibilities, and *does he not occupy himself fully* with them ? Tell him all he need do is to write a letter to the officer-in-charge across the river, telling him what the old man said—I shall be glad to draft the letter—and then forget all about it. And if he does not, really I am tempted to write a letter to the Collector, with a copy to the Commissioner, giving a full account of his far-famed special deeds up-to-date and suggesting humbly that perhaps the Secretariat or the Judiciary would be the best setting for the *healthy and long life of this undoubtedly* great man and the peace of mind of his harassed present subordinates. To last out this exhausting touring life of ours, one must sleep well at night, and how can one sleep well, if at least twice one *wakes up in a cold* sweat, seeing him go down in a fight surrounded by a dozen opponents or carried to the camp on a trestle, bleeding from a dozen wounds. Tell him this is much too much. He really must not embark on this new affair.' And I must tell you frankly, Sir, that though I *would not put it so strongly, my feeling* is the same."

The Assistant Collector having listened attentively, fell into a *brown study, then said, "How fortunate I am, Pribhdasji,* how fortunate to have such fine men, such sincere genuine men as my colleagues. Tell the Head Munshi Sahib and the 2nd Head Clerk Sahib and yourself too that I listened to your message with the greatest respect and am inclined to agree that perhaps you are right. But ask

them, did they see that most pathetic aged nobleman's strained face and did they note his most tragic eyes ? You saw them, didn't you ? Well, tell them I would be ashamed of myself for ever if being able to, I did not do everything I could to serve the cause of justice in this matter, which after all is all the simple old man asked me to do. In your heart you think the same, don't you, Pribhdasji ? " " Yes, Sir, " said the sheristedar, his eyes wet, " only prudence..." " Ah, there you've named it. Prudence is in fact my second name; not one unnecessary risk do I take. Always care, always thought, always on guard, each step thought out well ahead once one has risky business in hand. Tell them that and say I'm on casual leave for two days from tomorrow, urgent personal reasons. I know there are no engagements fixed during inspection tomorrow and day after was in any case a non-inspection day. On the third day you may expect me back before midday. Now, your report ? "

" The old gentleman is as simple as a babe, Sir. He let out a good deal that was very damaging to his son. It seems between him and the deceased there certainly was strong enmity. The son at one time was a very gay young spark. Ten years ago he married a beautiful but firm-willed lady, a notable heiress. She bore him three children and made of him a very responsible and well-behaved pillar of society. He was so fond of her that he even passed over good occasion for a fight or two lest she might be displeased. Unfortunately in bearing him a fourth child, the good lady died, taking the child with her. She took also all restraint on his conduct. He set up a separate establishment away from the rest of the family. He disappeared for months on end to the city twenty miles away and was there seen in the famous house of joy. He there had a most furious quarrel over a woman with the deceased. This was about a year ago. The old man got to know all this only after the arrest. His second son told him to emphasise the need for clever lawyers and false witnesses. There seems no doubt the second son was genuinely convinced his brother was not the murderer. In fact, he told his father he was quite sure, but would not disclose where his brother was that night. So there you are, Sir, a seeming strong case in all conscience. Accused and deceased bitter enemies. Accused's special knife the weapon that caused death. Nothing to show that accused was not there. "

"H'm," said the Assistant Collector, "one point stands out, the leman, as the old man called her. Who was she, where did she come from, had she anything to do with the accused, what statement did she make to the investigating officers?" "I'm afraid the old gentleman knows nothing at all about all that. The first report document of which he had a copy said she awoke with a start and seeing her lover bleeding profusely, screamed the house down. The police must have handled her pretty rigorously, but she seems to have been able to maintain her position, for she is not in custody and is shown as an important witness in the notes from the diary, of which the old man also seems to have got a copy." "You have it all in writing, haven't you? Good, let me keep that. I'll look it over again before sleeping. Who knows, the mind may work on it during sleep. And now good-night, Pribhdasji, and say good-night and 'God protect you' from me to your colleagues also. Sleep well, so that long before you awake I may be across the river, fleeing callously from my poor, forsaken camp." "It pleases you to joke, Sir," said Pribhdas, and then with almost a sob, "God protect you, noble one. His shadow always be upon you," and he stumbled out.

The Assistant Collector read through the papers twice, and locked them up in his table drawer. Calling for Anwar Khan he then went into the second side-room of the tent and making Anwar remove the boxes on top of a huge camel-chest, threw the lid back, and from the second compartment took out a small farmer's costume, complete from simple turban to thick-soled country shoes, and carried it to his bedroom. When the camel-chest had been closed and covered with the boxes that had been on it before, "Now, Anwar Khan," he said, "you have seen nothing since you came in at my call. Agreed? Yes? Good. Put your bedding in the office-tent and go to sleep. At four exactly wake up. Here's a low-tinged alarm clock set at four to help you. Make tea on that stove in the corner as quietly as possible, and without lighting up the place. Call out softly and see that I wake up while you are making the tea. Then a young poor farmer will take tea with you and disappear. You will have seen nothing and will know nothing. You will go back to sleep. Yes? Excellent." "Here see," said the Assistant Collector showing him a belt with two daggers in it, "this for the waist and this for the hand," picking up a heavily-loaded walking stick. "Satisfied? wel

then. God protect you and make your slumber refreshing." And retiring to his bedroom, having put everything in order for the morning and placed a bag of gold coins in a deep inner pocket of his long coat, he fell fast asleep even as he was reciting the second of the first two short prayers of his faith.

The first dawn next day found a young farmer on the other side of the river, making his way to the deceased's residence. Light was spreading, though the sun was not yet up, when at a little distance from the main gate he was accosted by a merry-eyed man-servant. "Whither away so early?" said the man. "To the farm twelve miles away to look at the new seed crop which I am told is doing exceedingly well and would I think perhaps suit my kind of soil. I must complete the journey there, see all I want to and reach home again by the night, so I started early," said the Assistant Collector, knowing well the best way to quench the idle curiosity was to volunteer a mass of unimportant detail. "Come, break your fast with me. I'm at that cottage there. It won't take more than twenty minutes and I shall be glad of fresh company after the melancholy days we have been having since my poor master's murder," said the man. "Thank you very much," said the Assistant Collector. "Yes, I heard something about that. One puzzling point in the story they told me was that a woman was sleeping beside your master but said she never saw the miscreant. Is that correct?" "That woman! I wouldn't believe a word she said, anyhow. A cunning bitch, my friend, if ever there was one. Living at my master's cost and laying up a fortune and playing Heaven or rather the Devil knows how many games of her own on the side. I nearly caught her out once with the smooth boy she brought with her, young cousin, she calls him, but she passed all off with such aplomb, I stopped silent. The master, in any case, God give him peace, was completely obsessed with her." After they had settled down to hot sugared milk and **parathas**, the Assistant Collector asked casually, "Is the cousin still at the house?" "No, he left for a relative's place two hundred miles away two days before the murder. He said good-bye to all of us, for he said he was thinking of settling there and might not see us again for a long time," said the servant. "And where does the woman come from?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No one knows," was the answer, "though some say she used to practise at the famous House of Joy in the city, which the master used to visit pretty regularly after his

wife died. I thought at times he would make her his second wife, he so doted on her. God be praised he didn't, for a cunninger minx and more mischievous it would be difficult to find. There she is now in the house pretending to be all broken down, and acting as if she were truly the widowed lady of the house." The talk was then *turned to other* matters by the Assistant Collector, who thanking his host profusely, left a few minutes later.

"Well, we shall have to go so gay to-night, there's nothing else for it. But first a horse or I shall never be able to make it in time to the city," said the Assistant Collector to himself. A little further up the road came a man on a horse, leading another by the reins. He was going at a fair pace, so judging the distance, the Assistant Collector stepped into the middle of the road and made a low bow. Stopping suddenly, the horseman shouted, "Cursed be the misbegotten ape who interrupts a gentleman on his morning ride." "Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "your courteous address to a stranger overwhelms me. I did not stop you for no reason. You have two steeds. I need one urgently. Would you please be so good as to sell it to me?" "God in Heaven, fellow, sell a horse bred in my stables to an impudent scum! I would have to know your ancestry for two hundred years before I so much as allowed your leg to cross his back. But now I take a second look, there probably is some blood behind you. No, I won't sell you the horse, I'll fight you for it." "A privilege and a pleasure, Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "weapons?" "Well, my axe is at home and you carry no sword. But I see you have stout loaded stick and I this powerful **lorh**. That serve you?" And he sprang down from his horse and tethered both the steeds to a nearby tree. "Ready," said the Assistant Collector and the fight began. In the first few moments, it became clear to the Assistant Collector that his haughty opponent had not the right technique for the **lorh**. He wavered between axe-strokes and sword-play with it. So, after crashing down two staggering blows on the man's shoulders, as he reeled, the Assistant Collector landed a most painful one on his right hand, causing him to drop his **lorh**. As he swore viciously in vexation, holding his hand, the Assistant Collector untied the led horse and jumping on its back said, "Farewell, champion, if I can, I shall let you have your nag back sooner or later. And do not vex yourself about my lowly origin. There is no nobler blood than mine anywhere on this earth."

Reaching the city about six that evening, the Assistant Collector rode straight to the largest consumer's shop. Tying his horse to the gate-post, he walked in and sank down on the gadi where the old proprietor sat. "Look you, friend," said he, "I am from the country for a night of pleasure. Dress me in the most fashionable style. Also if you have an outer room behind the shop, keep it for me till tomorrow morning. But first my horse. Tell your attendant to look after it. And a bath if you please with plenty of hot water and the special perfume of khas." And he dropped by the costumier's side two gold pieces. The old man smiled and said, "Your dress is lowly, your tone high, Sir. However I take no offence. By now, I know men. So all shall be as you wish. After the bath, dinner in your room and then we shall fit you out to outshine the sun himself." "No, no, be more modest. Not sober of course, but not outer also. Just the thing, you know," said the Assistant Collector. "Certainly Sir, all in the best taste," said the old man. The Assistant Collector had a look at his horse and made sure it had been properly rubbed down, fed and watered. Then the bath, which he enjoyed greatly and an excellent dinner on which he congratulated the cook, a huge Habshi, who ginned all over his face as he received a quarter gold piece and raised his voice in blessings.

Followed an hour with the costumier and his master tailor and he was ready for the evening, perfectly dressed from his red soft leather high shoes to his many-coloured Benarasi-woven, elaborately-built turban. By his side in an enamelled belt hung an ornamental sword, primarily for show yet with the blade and point sufficiently edged to be of use in case of need. "Well, friends," said he, "now I leave. May the angels guard your slumbers." "A moment, Sir," said the old merchant, "you are not quite complete," and he took two rings out of a drawer, putting one on the third finger of the Assistant Collector's left hand, and one on the little finger. "You fight right-handed?" he asked anxiously and when the Assistant Collector nodded, "Well then, that's right. A ring on the sword-hand can sometimes mean the difference between life and death. It affects the nimbleness of the fingers, and inhibits delicate play." "Why, Sir, you are a true swordsman, and a generous one at that," said the Assistant Collector, "I take it the diamond in this large ring is worth at least a hundred gold pieces and the deep-blue sapphire in the smaller one at least eighty. And you entrust these to a stranger as if they were bagatelles." "Aye, but to what a man,"

said the merchant, "one such as I have never come across in many years here. Good luck go with you, lord, and attend you in your mission, for it's not pleasure you seek here. These fine trappings are the uniform of duty." "Heaven bless your sagacity, oh ancient," said the Assistant Collector. "I look forward to seeing you before I leave." And he stepped out to stroll to the House of Joy only a quarter of a mile away. As he approached it his thoughts were of Alfresun's great-aunt and of Alfresun. Neither he decided could yet have returned from their visits and even had he remained in camp, there would have been no news.

## XIX

The finely-carved door of the House of Joy was flung open as the Assistant Collector approached it. A richly-dressed page, a pretty girl of about thirteen disguised as a boy, bowed low and welcomed him in. Closing the door carefully after him, she led him, to a large room at one side of the house. "The Master," she said, pointing to a man of about forty, soberly-clad, casting up figures in a long book that he held on his knees. Seeing the Assistant Collector, he set aside his book and, bowing, desired his commands. "I heard much about the wonders of your house," said the Assistant Collector, "from a friend who, alas, is no more with us," and he mentioned the name of the murdered man, "so having a free evening I thought I would come and see for myself." "Very welcome are you, Sir," said the Master, "we are honoured to have so distinguished a presence among us. Perhaps I may venture to offer a little refreshment before introducing you to the most beautiful and accomplished ladies who adorn our establishment. Many a gentleman who comes here is so completely bewildered by the profusion of charm and talent he sees on every side that he finds it very difficult to make a choice of a companion. That will not, I am sure, be your honour's problem, for undoubtedly your honour is both discriminating and decisive. From Circassia to the Spice Islands has our search for worthy representatives been, and truly, forgive me for saying so myself, we have been very successful, as you will see shortly.

"Good," said the Assistant Collector, placing five pieces of gold on a little table that, bearing a tall blue vase with in it a single crimson tulip, stood by the side of the settee on which he was seated, "a glass of wine would certainly be welcome." Bringing out a flask and a handsome goblet, the Master poured out the wine, "Nay, Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "I like not drinking alone. Will you not join me?" "Your condescension honours me, Sir," said the Master, and poured out a glass for himself. Saying, "May this night yield you more joy than any before," he drank the wine greedily. Then only did the Assistant Collector raise his goblet to his lips. "It has been said that my poor friend was comforted in the solitude of his residence by a very able and charming lady from this house. Do you permit such arrangements? I enquire as my own life has become rather lonely of late, and who knows, perhaps, one may come across a paragon here." "I shall be quite honest with your honour. We do not encourage any of our young ladies to make any such semi-permanent arrangements. Marriage of course is quite another thing. That we welcome, though it may mean considerable loss to us, for we consider that a deed of merit and little enough is the chance of achieving 'sawab' for me and my partners. The case of the girl you mention was however quite exceptional. So sweet-faced, so innocent-seeming she looked, but because of her many a fight took place here and we were always in fear lest her intrigues might cause such bloodshed that the authorities might be forced to close down the place. So when, following upon a fierce quarrel between two wealthy patrons over her, one, your friend, offered us a considerable sum to let her go with him and she, caring naught for us or her sister's heart-break, was only too anxious to go, we let her," said the Master.

"She has a sister here, then?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes, and of a very different nature from hers too. A trifle mature, she has reached twenty-two, or else in view of the obvious refinement perceptible in your Honour, she is the one I would most confidently have recommended for your companionship this evening. A wonderful singer, she is too, a true nightingale," replied the Master. "A singer of great merit" exclaimed the Assistant Collector. "That settles it. You know our ancient Northern saying about song

and music being the food of the soul. I am a firm believer in it, and since it is but rarely that I have of late had opportunity to give the soul a feast, I seize this with enthusiasm. Come, good host, to your nightingale let us go." "Your Honour no doubt knows that the talented are often moody," said the Master hesitatingly, "so the lady may prove somewhat difficult, perhaps. I would not have you think I misled you." "Never worry, man," said the Assistant Collector. "If I fail to win her favour, the fault will be my own. You I absolve of all blame." The Master smiled, then led the way to a room on the first floor and knocked at the door.

"Come in," said a rich, vibrant voice. Entering behind the Master, the Assistant Collector saw a tall, handsome woman, with a most expressive face, a long slender neck and eyes full of pathos. On a divan she sat, in her hands what the Assistant Collector recognised as a rare, illuminated edition of the saint-poet's lyrics. Before the Master could speak, he stepped forward and bowing deeply, said, "Are you so unhappy, child?" She looked into his eyes, sensed the goodwill in them, then let the tears roll down her cheeks, without a word, without a sob, as if some dam that had held them back for a long time, had at last been breached. The Assistant Collector sat down beside her, and taking her hand in his, held it lightly. The Master slipped out closing the door quietly behind him. It was quite a few minutes before the woman regained control of herself. Then withdrawing her hand from the Assistant Collector's and wiping her eyes and tears with a silk kerchief, she said, "Pardon me, I'm here to entertain you, and instead I weep before you. What kind of entertainment is that?" "Hush," said the Assistant Collector, "blame not your tears, for they have made us friends, haven't they?" The woman looked at him for a long moment, then smiled and nodded. "You came to-?" she asked. "To hear you sing. Music is a passion with me and when I heard of your famous voice and great skill with the instruments, I could not keep away," said the Assistant Collector.

"Come, then, to the music-room" she said, and led the way to a large chamber next to hers, one wall of which was covered by an ample Persian rug, with a motif of polo-players in the centre and hunting scenes along the sides. The Assistant Collector looked at it in admiration and at her, as taking her place on the red-tiled floor

directly in front of the rug, she gestured him to a low cushioned seat a few yards away, and struck a note on a single-string instrument she had picked up from a shelf on a side-wall. Softly her voice whispered the invocation with which begins the third of the saint-poet's lyrics, the one in which all the despair of sundered lovers seems to be gathered together and embodied, "Lord, merciful God, generous Ruler of Heaven and Earth, be kind to me, Mighty one, let me die, die, die."

Then came the pause, which only the true artiste can till with significance by her stance, and the powerful, wonderfully-modulated voice filled the room with the classic description of the joys of love that many have felt the saint-poet could scarcely have composed, if there was any reality at all in the first part of his title, and many have argued constitutes beyond doubt no small part of his real moral worth. As she came to the last line of the first part with its triumphant declaration, "the body is joy, unequalled, immense," the Assistant Collector heard from all round him a murmur of admiration and turning saw quite a number of attractive women, most with a cavalier beside them, a few without. In a corner sat the Master, lost to the world from his totally abstracted expression. Again came the whispered invocation, shaking the audience to its core. Followed the second verse with its merry description of the quarrels of lovers that end always in kisses, playful, intense, soft, battling, curing all grievances, wiping out all hard memories. Smiling, the singer stopped. Then like the voice of doom the invocation, followed by that most heart-rending verse about the despair of lovers separated never to meet. The eyes not only of the women but of most of the men were wet as the song ended on that high note of tragedy, "Why gave thou me birth, lord, thou that hath ta'en my beloved from me," followed by the whispered cry of despair. The artiste stood utterly unmoving as if turned ino the very figure of grief. Then turned away and sat down on a low stool with her back to the audience.

Followed an hour of unparalleled delight—lyric, ballad, extract from epic, persian, circassian, armenian, with ever and anon a return to the saint-poet's classics that were household words to almost all present there. Ending with the haunting

"love of my life,
oh boy, oh man,
you have left me and killed me,
my body on earth, my heart in hell,"

she burst into a torrent of sobs, weeping quite unconcernedly while all around watched her. The Assistant Collector picked up a a goblet of wine that had been placed by his side. Taking the few steps between them, he dropped down on one knee and held it to her, his head bowed, as a page on great occasions would to his lord. She looked at him wonderingly, then said, " Great Sir, you do me too much honour, it is not fitting. " Still on his knee, his head bowed, the Assistant Collector answered, " It is most fitting that your Majesty be served thus, for truly the realm of song has no Queen but you." All applauded. The singer smiled, and taking the goblet drained it. Then drawing him up she made him a most elaborate courtesy, and putting her hand on his arm, led him into her room. She sat him down on a divan, and fetching food and wine, made him eat and drink, finally at his persuasion sitting down beside him and eating and drinking herself.

When both had finished and she had removed the dishes and washed their hands with rose-water, she said, "Lord, shall I dance for you ?" "That, lady, would be wonderful, but please do not, for I doubt if my good resolutions would not crumble into dust at the sight of your dancing." She looked at him doubtfully, then said, "It cannot be, but is it possible you are not a man ?" "Alas," said the Assistant Collector "that easy way out is not for me. No. God forgive me. I am too much of a man altogether." "What ails you then ? My heart beats for you, my arms long for you. No ? Well then it must be that you despise me. You think me totally unworthy." And angrily she strode away to the window at the other end of the room. "Come here, come, dear child," said the Assistant Collector and when she did, pointed to the carpet beside the divan on which he was sitting. "Now lay your head upon the divan by my side, yes, face down and just be still," and pushing her long hair out of the way over her head, he began to massage gently the back of her neck. From the end of the skull to the nape of the neck his fingers moved rythmically, systematically, diverting once in six to the temples and on to the top of the ears. After ten minutes he said. "And do you

think if I despised you, I would be thus turning myself into your physician ? How are you feeling ? Better, more rested, no churning of emotions ? Good. Listen I'll tell you how I came to know of this method of relieving stress. When I was a boy of six, I had a wonderful sister. She was married and came to our house to have her first child. She was so beautiful and so kindly that it used to fill my heart with joy just to be with her. One afternoon, coming back from school, I found her sad and harassed. I burst into tears and said, 'Why are you looking so different ?' She consoled me, took me in her arms, then said, 'Well it's been a trying morning, what with malicious letters, and people's bad tempers and I'm feeling very upset and angry myself. I wish I had brought my clever tirewoman along. She would have massaged my neck and made me feel calm.' 'Well,' said I, 'if you show me what to do, I'll do it. You needn't bemoan your maid's absence.' 'Silly billy,' she said, rumpling my curly hair and then, 'Why not ?' So she took me into our drawing-room, put her head down on a sofa, put me on the sofa beside it and showed me what to do. After nearly half an hour, she lifted her head and said, 'Wonderful. I'm feeling quite myself again. Come, let's go into the garden.' Twice or thrice on that visit and sometimes on her later visits, I was called upon to be useful in this way. Since then this is the first time I've tried it. How are you feeling ?" Raising her head, the singer said, "I feel quite calm. Thank you very much. There can't be any better man than you. God give you long life, much power, and all happiness."

"I told you we were friends," said the Assistant Collector "and we are, aren't we ?" "Of course," said the singer, and she took his hand and shook it firmly as one would a friend's. "Well, now," said the Assistant Collector, "since you are my friend, it becomes my duty to get you out of this abode of bliss, that is, of course, if you want to leave it." "And if I don't ?" said the singer. "Well then, since you will still be my friend, I shall try and keep an eye on your welfare from outside, and occasionally come and see you." She looked at him amazedly for a minute, then threw herself into his arms and said peremptorily, "Hold me, I must get over this shock. Did you say you were my friend or my father ? I am a singing-girl at best. You are a great nobleman at worst, and without any carnal intent or likelihood of benefit of any kind from me, you are making

yourself into my friend, nay guardian, if I don't die of surprise before that."

"You puss, you," said the Assistant Collector, picking her up and setting her down on the divan with a thud, "play games with me would you ? I wish I were your father; I would spank you so effectively that you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week. And though I am merely a friend, remember if I slap you just once, you will have to spend a fortnight on liquid food. No, stay there. The next trick you try I shall shake you so thoroughly, your teeth will continue to rattle long after I have gone. Now listen, dear heart, you are a great artiste. With a sign, a gesture, a song you turn men's and women's hearts to water. You raise them to the skies, you plunge them into despair. This then is my plan for you. It came into my head just now as I was speaking to you, and if you don't like it, we shall just forget it. But first tell me, you do believe I am your friend ?" "Certainly," said the singer, quite seriously, "the best I have ever had or shall have." "Well, I know a very remarkable man, probably the greatest poet in our language at this time, a great lover and practitioner of music, too. He is in his early thirties, a handsome man by any standards, strong, brave, vigorous and a widower with no children but with 200 acres of good two-crop land. One song from you and he will be bowled over. You too are bound to be very impressed by him once you meet him and hear him recite his poetry. So I suggest you two get married." "A most excellent suggestion dear, dear friend, a very well-thought out highly prudent suggestion, only why should a man of good family, owner of an estate, marry a girl out of a brothel ?" said the singer. "Well, now, you needn't be in the brothel. You can just go and stay with an old nurse I know in her cottage about thirty miles from here. If the Master won't let you go on your own, I'll pay him compensation and settle it that way. Of course, I'll have to tell the poet all about you when I put the idea to him. And of course, it'll depend on your and his liking one another sufficiently. Even otherwise, it doesn't matter, you can always with your own voice set up as an independent, completely respectable artiste in the cities of the South," said the Assistant Collector.

"I don't even know your name, friend," said the singer, "but clearly you have settled my future. I agree to all you say. The Master

will let me go without demur. You see, since for the last year, my source of income has only been from my art, I having refused to entertain any clients, however high the remuneration, I am no longer an important source of gain. Besides he is not a bad man, and has a sneaking regard for me. So give me the Nurse's address and a message to her and I shall be there on the third day from tomorrow." "Excellent. Give me pen and paper. Here is the nurse's name and residence. And since she doesn't read tell her the man who carries his tea and tin pannikin with himself and boils the water from any stream sent you. Then you can describe me, see," and taking off his turban, he showed her his head with its crop of curly black hair. "If she is still doubtful say the man with the **lorh**, that should be enough." "God in Heaven, who are you then, some formidable robber-chief," gasped the singer. "No such great man, lady," said the Assistant Collector, "just an humble servant of the good and your very devoted friend. Now tell me about yourself. After all I must give some account of you to your groom-to-be, when I tell him he cannot do better than fall for you."

"My father, a small-landholder, died during the great fevers, and my mother with him, leaving two girls behind, I six and my sister, four. A distant kinsman took over the land, and we continued to live with him, his wife and their three children. My sister, who delighted in mischief used often to taunt the eldest son with the fact that they were living on our land and enjoying our bounty. A great hatred of us was thus engendered in our cousins, and when several years later, first the wife and after a short time the husband died, on a plea of taking us to visit relatives on the other side of the river, the eldest son brought us to the city and unbeknown to us had us looked over by the Master. We both satisfied his exacting standards, and so our cousin, having taken money from him—100 gold pieces, I learned later—disappeared, leaving us stranded and in despair. Like Providence the Master appeared, when we were desperate even for food, and ushered us into this new life of luxury and skill in love. My sister, fourteen then, took to it like a duck to water. She was soon highly regarded, had a room to herself, and began to lay aside money. The rule of the house was half of all the inmates get to them, half to the Master, who was responsible for food, clothing, furniture, decoration, everything in fact. Not unfair at all.

"For a long time, my aversion to be snatched at by anyone at random, made me unpopular and I had to share a room with the old house-keeper, a Circassian of considerable intelligence, learning and kindliness. She taught me to read and write, to stand and move, and after she had once or twice heard me sing, gave me lessons and had the Master pay for special instructors. She often said to me, 'For this profession, you will be no use, though if you ever fall in love, you may be tolerable afterwards, but a great singer you will certainly be if you work hard.' She it was who got them to put in the music-room, and it was with her son that I finally fell in love. He was a delightful youth, so charming that I was swept off my feet, so grasping that to get him money, I began to please the customers. Soon I was the leading light of the house and could command as much as thirty gold pieces for a night's entertainment. The more I earned, the more my lover fleeced me. My sister, who had become very jealous of me, meanwhile got into intrigue after intrigue, causing the most violent quarrels between her lovers and delighting in them. Finally, two men (she named the deceased and the accused), fought a duel on the premises and the Master was only too delighted to let her go, when the winner offered him handsome compensation for the loss of her earnings. On the morning of her departure she came into the office-room, to which I had been promoted, since I was doing the house-keeper's work after her death, to say good-bye. I wished her luck in her new life and gave her a handsome present. After she had gone a couple of days, I discovered she had taken not only all the precious things I thought I had safely hidden in my room, but also my first and only real love. So overcome was I that I fell seriously ill, raving in delirium and was weak as a kitten for quite some time after my recovery. This was the period during which I vowed I would sell my body no longer. If I was paid for my songs, well and good. Beyond that I kept the household economy in good order, and this in itself was worth more than my board and lodging. Reluctantly the Master agreed; since then my blood has not moved for any man until today, and then, such is my fortune, you rejected me."

"Splendour of God, lady," said the Assistant Collector, "I reject you! Say rather when you said we were friends, you rejected me, for a friend's duty it is, is it not, not to harm his friend, not to put her in a false position, not to do something which will bring

her temporary pleasure, but ultimate pain ?" "Ah, yes, I suppose you are right with your arguments," said the singer, "but what I can't forget is that I sought the comfort of your lips and arms and you said to me no." "If you continue further in this strain," said the Assistant Collector "on your head be whatever happens. Remember always then after tonight you will see me no more." "Kiss me, lord, kiss me," was the reply. Their lips met and all restraint seemed to be slipping away, when at last she murmured in his ear, "Wonderful is this state of total unreason, lord, and yet what you said is right. I would rather be your friend while life lasts than your lover for a night or two. So if you can let me go, do so. And if you cannot that surely is Heaven." Slowly the Assistant Collector's mind resumed sway over his body. "Bless you," he said as he finally released her. She fell on her knees by his side and kissed his hands.

"And what shall I tell the husband I have selected for you. Shall I tell him this also ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Tell him whatever you will. Tell him I was tempted and forgot we were friends, but that in good time we both remembered it. That's the truth. And tell me are you sorry about what happened ? I am not, I am very glad," said the singer. "Before God, so am I", said the Assistant Collector. "And now, friend, farewell. If all goes as we planned, you will soon be a respectable married lady, happy with your poet. If it does not, you will be provided with advice and funds and will become a great light of the musical world in the cities of the South. Here is a small purse to help you on your journey. God protect you." "And you, prince of men, may His light always shine for you," was the whispered answer. As the Assistant Collector made his way to the outer door, the Master of the house stepped forward as if to say something, then bowed low and said only, "God be with you." to which the Assistant Collector answered, "and with you too." Indeed it was not until he reached the costumier's that his mind regained its usual equanimity and he was able to consider the next step to be taken.

## XX

The Assistant Collector had scarcely sat down on the divan in his courtyard room, when in came the costumier, carrying in his hand a covered bowl. "Drink, Sir," he said. "What is it ?" asked the Assistant Collector, taking the bowl. "A special **kaveh** my grandfather, a man who worked much at night and slept little by day, invented. Since you have only a short time to sleep tonight and much to do tomorrow I think, it is just the thing for you." "Health to you, ancient," said the Assistant Collector, taking a draught, and then "and to your grandfather eternal peace, for truly this is a most refreshing and heartening potion. You are very right, much must be done tomorrow by day and by night. And so I will with your help begin to prepare. First of all, here are your rings, sword, and costume. That last is so exactly the thing that I wish I could keep it, but one has to cast oneself now for another role, so farewell, noble finery." And undressing, he carefully set aside the clothes and rolled himself up in a thin **rezai** that lay at the head of the divan. "Tell me," he said to the costumier, who had settled down on the carpet beside the divan, "master of all appropriate wisdom that you obviously are, what is your conception of the proper appearance of the Executioner of the Wrath of God ? I do not say, mind you, that there is one. I do not know nor I suppose does anyone else, so let us not get into a side-argument on that score. All I say is, assuming there were one, how would you present him ?" "Countenance and bearing, I will leave to him who has to act the part. I am sure nothing will be lacking in the sternness of the face, the lowering of the brow, the doom in the voice, the threat in every gesture, if your honour has the role. As to accoutrement, black undoubtedly, but not an ordinary black, no, the deep, deep black that brings to mind Hell itself in the midst of the brightest noon. Yes, that black from the turban plume to the shoe sole. For weapons, a black-handled, black-headed axe as the principal, and a black-

scabbarded sword with a plain black hilt in a black belt round the waist. Would that do in your view?" "Why, certainly, if you can provide all that by six in the morning, for I must leave then," said the Assistant Collector. The old man smiled. "You did not think, lord, I was just exercising my imagination, did you ? No, you felt I had what I was describing. Yes, it will all be ready at 5.30, and you will be awakened a little earlier, with some hot milk and fresh parathas. And now, sleep, you have but three hours to dawn." "Greatly am I obliged to you, good friend," said the Assistant Collector. "By the side of your fine clothes there, you will find a purse. Help yourself from it as you deem fit. No, don't bring it to me. Good-night." And he stretched himself out on the divan, closing his eyes. The old man looked at him for a moment, took three gold pieces from the purse and then putting it on a little stool by the divan, went out closing the door carefully behind him.

When next morning the Assistant Collector, all in black, stepped out into the courtyard and axe in hand, turned a hard look on the groom who was walking his horse up and down, with a shriek the man dropped the reins and stood shivering. "Very effective, Sir, as you see," said the old costumier. "Yes," said the Assistant Collector "and yet something is missing. I have it. A touch of red, the deep crimson of dark venous blood. Is that possible ?" The old man thought, then hurried away and after a few minutes returned with a short cloak, crimson on one side, black on the other. Throwing it, red side up, round the Assistant Collector's shoulders he said, "Yes, that is the right last touch. Now, old as I am I myself would run a mile from you, were my conscience in the least burdened. God have mercy on those that face you today." "God be with you, friend, and fortune attend you. If justice is done in the matter I have in hand, no small part of the success will be due to you. We shall meet again, God willing," and shaking his hand warmly, the Assistant Collector was a minute later in the saddle and riding away.

The morning being very fresh and pleasant, the Assistant Collector's mood was soon completely at variance with his frightening costume. Unloosening the gilt throat-strings of the blood-red cloak he took it off and laid it in front of him, black side up, on his saddle. His first stop, he had decided, was to be at the jail where the accused was in custody. Like all defence counsel, he thought to himself mock-

ingly, I must interview my client. Only my interview may help him to the gallows and not away from them if I come to the conclusion that he is guilty. Well, his father took the risk when he asked me to intervene. Still, ought I to warn him before I begin questioning him? We'll see. And he soon found himself carolling the lilting beat of the gazal in which the great lyricist laughs at the rapacity of his beloved and at his own enjoyment of that rapacity. And from there his mind and tongue went on to snatches of poetry in all the languages he knew. 'Trailing clouds of glory do we come,' he was reciting, when he felt an uneasiness in his steed and shortening the reins, spoke to it soothingly.

From the side of a tree had suddenly come forth a boy of about fifteen in a green robe with a shepherd's pipe in his hand, enough to startle any ordinary horse. Stopping the Assistant Collector said, "Peace be with you, oh master of many sheep." "And with you peace" said the boy falteringly. "O man in black, or am I wrong and are you a Jinn? Even then, the peace of God be with you," and he watched carefully to see if the Divine name caused his hearer any discomfort. Smiling, the Assistant Collector called out, "From Jinn, of rest, from devils of every kind, is there protection in my name, saith the one God." Confidently the boy came forward and held out his hand. The Assistant Collector shook it heartily. "You are a great warrior, will you honour me by sharing my breakfast? It is only cheese from goat's milk and bread, but you may like it," said the boy. "Gladly," said the Assistant Collector, dismounting, for he sensed the boy was seriously troubled about something and did not know how to come to the point.

Leading the way into a wood, the boy tethered the horse to a tree on the edge of a clearing, and from a bundle put out on a flat stone some chapatis and two pieces of white cheese. Gesturing to the Assistant Collector to sit on another flat stone facing the first, he plumped down on the grass and saying, "May the little we have be agreeable to you," handed over a chapati and a piece of cheese. Seeing the Assistant Collector eat with relish the simple fare, the boy relaxed and began enjoying his breakfast. "You called me master of many sheep," he said after a short while. "That is what I was until this morning. But now all I am master of is this pipe. Let me play on it while you eat; who knows, it may ease the pain in my heart."

The Assistant Collector nodded. The boy put the instrument to his lips and drew from it all the plaintiveness in the world with such skill that the Assistant Collector sat entranced. Next came the shepherd's call to his wandering sheep, long drawn out, simple melancholy, then the shepherd's love-song, and he ended with the threnody with which he had begun."You are a magician with that pipe, friend," said the Assistant Collector. "Almost I saw sheep jumping about as you played, and a beautiful maiden beside that tall tree."

"The maiden I will show you," said the boy, leading the Assistant Collector to the tree, on the trunk of which, the bark having been peeled off and a flat surface smoothed out, was a five-foot painting in coloured chalk of a real rustic beauty. It was a genuine work of art. The painter had caught exactly the mood of impudent gaiety, which must have made the model a delightful, difficult tease in real life. Her air of complete self-possession was there too. No simple miss, this, her expression said, she knew and could judge. The attention lavished on the colourful clothes, the heavy silver bracelets, showed the great love with which the work was done. "Whoever painted this," said the Assistant Collector, "is a true artist. I salute him and the world will too once it sees this." "Why," "said the boy, "It's nothing. She's my cousin and I'm going to marry her soon. She would sometimes pretend to be very grown up and say she couldn't come and play with me any more now. So to tease her I made this copy of her and told her I had my special beloved with me now and if she didn't want to come out and see me, she need not. Next day, when I brought the sheep into the shade at midday, I found her here gazing raptly at herself. 'You see me like that, dearest Farrokh,' she cried and kissed me with a warmth I had never found in her before. She agreed readily to my plea that we should get married in a couple of months, and said she would work on both her parents and especially on her father who is very fond of her, to fix an insignificant bride price. But now, alas, all that is a dream, for a ruined man can scarcely ask even a maiden who loves him to marry him. Yes, alas, now all that I can hope to have is this beauty here."

"But what happened this morning?" asked the Assistant Collector. "My total wealth, two hundred of the best sheep in the province, armed bandits carried off. I thought they were quite safe, for two hardy and trustworthy men were in charge of them and

they had four of the fiercest sheep-dogs of the countryside with them. I hurried back at dawn from a village five miles away—there had been a wedding of a connection I could not avoid going to—and found both the men, all the dogs, and the sheep vanished. I followed the tracks for a while and guessed where they are, but there's nothing more to be done now. They are gone just as surely as if I had seen them slaughtered and eaten before my own eyes." "Splendour of God, man, is there no blood in your veins that you talk thus ?" said the Assistant Collector. "If you are alone and can do nothing yourself, at least get to the nearest authority and complain so that a posse of police can fall upon them." "The authorities can take no urgent action, Sir. The thieves are from across the border. If I complain all I'll get is a letter six months later saying nothing is known there of any sheep being stolen. No, it was destiny, and against that even Caliph Haroon could do nothing, as you know," said the young Farrokh forlornly. "Be careful, oh faint-heart, that the beauty on the tree does not stretch forth her hand and slap you hard. You must disgust her as much at least as you do me. You have lost your sheep, you say you have lost your bride, so will it matter so much if you lose your life, recreant ? You can fight, can't you, or can you only make music on your pipe and draw on wood ? Listen, if in five minutes I see you axe in hand. I promise to accompany you to this nest of thieves and try and get your sheep back. I have a mission in hand, but a couple of hours I can spare. From what you say the place is near," said the Assistant Collector. "Oh most welcome words," said the boy, "they are just what I wanted to hear, great Sir. I am ready." And he threw off the green robe to disclose a tight-fitting tunic and a belt with two daggers in it round his waist. Stepping behind a tree, he came back with a very useful-looking axe, and saluted with the double flourish, saying, "Sir, I place myself under your orders to be your man and serve you faithfully." "Rightly did the saint-poet say :

*Beware, warrior, beware the pretty lady in deep distress,*
But beware even more the gentle youth,
So simple, heart-broken, so sad.

You rascal, you were leading me on, were you ? Well when we've got your sheep back, I shall give you something that will make you recollect me for quite some time. Why couldn't you speak out straightaway and ask for help ?" "Well, your honour might have

ridden on. No, I know that you would not have, but your appearance made me nervous. You must forgive me," said the boy.

"Knowledge being the beginning of strategy," said the Assistant Collector, "tell me about these bandits and the place they are in. Also what do you expect them to do with the sheep, keep them where they are or drive them to the nearest market for sale ?" "Four brothers whom their tribe has driven out have gathered another eight men around them, and make themselves a great nuisance to our parts. If possible, they don't kill, but rob or threaten and extort. My two men they must have carried away to make sure the sheep will be looked after. The dogs I think must be dead, for they wouldn't get reconciled to new masters. The encampment is three miles away. The sheep will be taken as soon as they can manage it to the fair six miles distant where buyers from the north give good prices and ask no questions. In an hour I think they will start. Today is the peak day of the fair and they wouldn't like to miss that, both for the prices and the fun they must be anticipating with my gold in their pockets," said Farrokh. "We are two, there is no time to raise more, they are twelve you say, so a direct attack on their village must be avoided. Tell me, on the path they must take to the market is there not some narrow place, some pass between the hills, where a man on a horse can block further progress ?" asked the Assistant Collector. The boy thought and said there was, about a mile from the village, almost the ideal spot for such an attempt. "Let's get there then as quickly as possible," said the Assistant Collector. And so they did, the boy running by the horse's side and showing the way.

"Now," said the Assistant Collector, having surveyed the scene and taken his station at the further end of the pass from the village, a little to the West so as not to be seen until those entering had come about half-way, "you had better get to the top of the right-hand hill, which I see is full of sizable boulders, collect about two dozen, and when I lift my axe, begin rolling them down as forcibly as possible. Some of your sheep may get hurt, but that can't be helped. We must create as much confusion as possible to ease my attack. Be careful you are not seen beforehand. Once the stones have taken effect come rushing down making as much noise as you can and fall on the man bring up the rear. God be with you until we meet in the middle. Wait. Have you killed before ? No ? Well there's no better

time to begin than in recovering what is yours and has been wrongly taken. And remember, if you feel ill when your axe crashes into your opponent's skull, it is his life or yours. That'll steady you. Now away. Keep an eye on me and start nothing until you see my axe above my head." The boy disappeared and, dismounting, the Assistant Collector made his charger and himself comfortable in the shade of a rock.

Scarcely twenty minutes had passed when he heard the shouts and curses of approaching men escorting a flock. Slipping into the saddle he watched until they were half-way through the pass, then took up his station right in the middle of the narrow path, the red cloak around his shoulders, his axe in his right hand but with the blade lowered. At the head of the flock walked three men. Suddenly the Assistant Collector spoke. "Thieves," he said in a voice like a clap of thunder, "return the booty, lest worst befall you." The three made as if to rush on him, then overcome by his complete impassivity hesitated and stopped. Their leader stepped forward and said harshly, "Who are you to call us thieves ? Get out of our way or..." "Or Bairam Khan, son of Uzbeg Khan," said the Assistant Collector, who had recognised the man, "will be greeting his father in Hell. As for who I am, know that I am the Executioner of the Wrath of God. That wrath is not against you at this moment, and if you do not all wish to taste the fires of Hell forthwith, return this flock to the innocent boy from whom you stole it, and let free his men you kidnapped. Enough of talk. Yes or No ? My axe is impatient for food," and he made as to charge. Said Bairam Khan, "I know that voice, this man reminds me of..." and then suddenly dropping his lorh, he darted forward and with a very low bow, said, "Lord, it is you, isn't it ? I know you, I knew you !" "Of course it is I, Bairam. You didn't take so long to recognise me when we last met, did you ? Now send these sheep back, will you, and give me some of your very rich and sweet tea. I've come to see your village."

"Most welcome, lord, you are most welcome," and then to his men who had gathered near, "This is the hakim I told you about. Two years ago, when through misfortune as you know, I was lying in the sirkar's jail in that frightful city of the South, at my wife's petition he went into the matter, found the right culprit and had me freed. And for six months in that God-forsaken entrance to Hell,

he saw that my wife and children had enough to live on. And when later I went to thank him at his camp, he said, 'Bairam, you were innocent of the crime for which you had been sentenced, and so it was right you should be freed. But you were not innocent of sinning against the wife who greatly loved you and tried so hard to serve you. So for that you must be punished. Now, we do not want you to be killed, so you can take me on with the lorh or Anwar Khan with the short stick. Choose. And when Anwar, a real expert, had beaten me up so that I could neither stand nor lie down, he told the Naik Sahib to look after me and three days later when I was able to leave for home, the Naik Sahib at his orders gave me large packets of special sweets, as presents for my children. Now this lord says the flock must go back. What do you say, brothers ?" "Why, of course," they all cried out, and one added, "We all enjoyed the sweets very much, lord."

The Assistant Collector shouted, "Farrokh, come down in peace." The boy came down cautiously and stood by the Assistant Collector, who said, "This is Farrokh Beg whose sheep wandered into your land. This is Bairam Khan who has kindly gathered them together and asks you and your two shepherds (now in his village) to take charge of them and lead them home. Further Bairam Khan says in future he will take care to see that none of your sheep ever wander into his land." "I am most grateful to Bairam Khan and all his people for all the trouble they have taken," said the boy with a grave face, while chuckles, suppressed at once, were heard from the others and Bairam actually seemed quite embarrassed. "Go now in peace, Farrokh Beg. God willing, we shall certainly meet again. And here is a token for the original of your picture on wood. Give it to her with the good wishes of the Executioner of God's Wrath, than which none can be more effective," and he handed over to him a silver ring with a curious agate set in it that he had found in the pocket of his black tunic. "Lord, I am grateful..." stammered the boy, bowing and touching the Assistant Collector's feet. "Bless you," said the Assistant Collector, patting him on the back, "it is I who should be grateful to you. Not often does one get the opportunity of serving such undoubted talent." The boy and one of the men turned the sheep around and soon all that was to be seen of them was a receding cloud of dust. Then to Bairam Khan said

the Assistant Collector, "I am very pressed for time, so I hope you will not mind my not visiting you this time. You and these gentlemen too will no doubt want to be pressing on to the fair. Now, I have been your guest here and you have entertained me most kindly, so I hope you will forgive me for making the tiny customary vails of a departing guest. They may just be of some use at the fair." And he pressed a half-ashrafi into the hands of each man, and an ashrafi in Bairam's. "God be with you all," he cried, and before they could reply, disappeared from their view.

It was past noon now. The Assistant Collector was a little weary and very hungry. He could see his horse too would be all the better for some rest. So he looked around for some likely place to stop at. Back in the Sirkar's land, a gleam of white some fields away caught his eye and making his way towards it, he found it to be a small house with a neat walled garden on one side. Entering the open gate of the compound, he looked around, but could find no one to announce his arrival to. A verandah went all the way round the house. Dismounting, he left his horse standing and walking to what he thought was the door into the house said, "May a weary and hungry traveller seek some rest and refreshment from this lordly abode ?" Hearing nothing, he repeated his plea loudly. From inside came a sound. Then a voice, the like of which he had never heard before, but for which he immediately thought there was only one word, silken, said, "Liar, it isn't lordly. But never mind, why don't you push the door open and come in ?" "Before I do that, may I have your permission to take my horse to the stables behind and see to him," said the Assistant Collector. "Certainly," said the voice, and then as if to itself, "promising, a man who sees to his horse before seeing to himself."

Having done everything necessary for his horse's comfort, and sluiced water on his face and hands, ten minutes later, the Assistant Collector knocked at the door again. "Come in, come in," said the voice and then as he entered and his eyes began to adjust to the darkened room, ' God be our refuge, what apparition have we here ? Oh study in deepest black and scarlet, my time has not come yet, surely. I am still enjoying life. Go away then, Death's messenger, if indeed you be truly he." "I cannot see you yet, lady," said the Assistant Collector, "but so wondrous is the music of your voice

that I would not mind your berating me with it for a full hour." "Ah, ha, a cavalier," said the voice. "If only you would take off that cloak and lay your turban aside, you would not look so gruesome. Why, that's splendid, a truly handsome man. Come now, do you see me ?" "I see only a glimmer in a dark alcove," said the Assistant Collector. "Yes, I forgot, they keep me thus through the day because they say my eyes would otherwise go. Wait, I'll put aside the screen."

As she did the Assistant Collector saw, seated in a high-backed chair, with a hand on each arm, a completely white-haired, extremely lovely old lady, very delicate-looking and frail, but with a gay twinkle in her eye and clearly with her mind in very good order. "Man, come here," she said, "no, not man, boy, come here, so that I can have a good look at you." And then, "Yes, for me you are a boy, though I have no doubt to men you are a very formidable man." The Assistant Collector bent down on one knee and kissed the lady's right hand. "Excellent," she said, rumpling his hair, "your mother taught you good manners. Yes, only your mother could have taught you that. Now do me a proper bow. Very good. I wish I could have replied with a deep curtsey to that. But alas, now I am confined to this chair. Oh, but you are hungry and I chatter away. My attendant I have sent out, so you'll have to look after yourself. Draw that table near and that stool to sit on. In the next room you'll find food ready, all cold I'm afraid, and some salad and fruit. Fetch it, I'll try a little chicken too. And there's some wine in the bucket of cold water on the side. Bring that too."

When all was properly set out, and the wine poured, the lady raised her glass and said, "To the most courteous of cavaliers." The Assistant Collector bowed and said, "To a voice that enchants, to eyes that bewitch, to beauty and sensitivity combined, I drink." The Assistant Collector ate well, the lady toyed with the food for a while, then gave up. "You are wondering about me," she said. "Don't. Chance has brought us together. I'm an old, old woman now, that's all there is about me. Tell me about your interests. Are there any great singers now? Any artists?" Before he knew what he was doing he was telling her about the wonderful singing he had heard last night about the actress element too in the singer, and enacting for her the pose at the end of the "let me die, die, die." "Sing me something

yourself," she said. "I know yours is not a trained voice, but no excuses. Just sing." He sipped a little wine and then sang for her the saint-poet's ecstasy at finding himself beloved, the stanzas of surprise, certainty, and triumph, with the 'I am loved,' expressed differently at the end of each. "Well done, oh well done," she cried clapping her hands together. He sang a couplet from Hafiz and let her complete the gazal, enjoying to the full the marvel of her voice. Her attendant, a pleasant-looking woman of about sixty came in and stood by her side. "Ah, yes," she said, "long past resting-time, I know, and excitement is not good for me, yes, yes, I know that, too. But today is exceptional. A friend has come to see me, a friend better than any I had in the past. I am a wicked woman, a very very wicked woman, but at least I can appreciate a real friend." "I think you are at heart a very good woman," said the Assistant Collector. "I think you are a woman any man would be glad to acknowledge as his mother." With her attendant's assistance she moved to a long sofa and lay down, then said, "Say that again." The Assistant Collector did. "Bend down," she said. The Assistant Collector did, to receive on his forehead and both his eyes kisses that seemed like rose-petals. "Bless you," she said and was asleep.

Her attendant, having covered her with a light rezai, beckoned him out. "And now," she said, "you will sleep for two hours at least before you go. Yes, I know you have plenty to do, but you are obviously weary. Where do you have to reach today? Oh, the taluka town, that's only an hour and a half's riding from here. It will do if you get there by five thirty, won't it? It's not two yet, so you can easily rest for a couple of hours. Come on. First into the bath. No, don't blush, I could almost be your grandmother. No, lie still. This hot water is for resting in, I'll do the laving. Good, now the towelling. Right, go to sleep now." "Good lady, tell me about your mistress, please," said the Assistant Collector. "Do not think much of her, I beg you. She has the fatal fascination that I believe could still drive man mad," said the attendant. "But what is her name? Who is she?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Well, seeing you are who you are, there can't be much harm in telling you. Her real name is Akhtari Sultana Banoo and I am her maid Jameela." "God, yes," said the Assistant Collector, "there are all manner of legends about both of you. You are famous people, lady." "You mean notorious.

Never mind, sleep. I'll wake you in good time and then you can go about serving the right," said the maid, making a face.

"You know me then ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Of course, many a time when on leave in your territory have I spent an afternoon listening to you and the petitioners. Yes, you've been a source both of great interest and some amusement to me," said the maid. " Why amusement ? " asked the Assistant Collector. " I hope I'm not pompous. Do tell me." "No, it's not pomposity; it is, I think, your persistent belief that things can be put right, that people can be improved, that amuses me. I know from living that human beings are as they are, that you can't do much with them. Mind you, I respect you for your efforts, and you do bring happiness into many lives. In any case, just go on doing what you have been doing, don't let an old cynic like me disturb you. And now, sleep. How different you are here from what you are in your tent ! So very near in spirit. What a very kind thing you said to the mistress." "It wasn't just kindness," said the Assistant Collector, "I really meant it. I am sure my mother of blessed memory would have liked her although she was of course very different from her." "It's strange your saying that. She has only one woman friend, you know and who do you think that is ? Why Zubeida Khanum. That warrior princess will walk in any time and spend two hours to three days with her, talking, singing, reading, doing all she can to amuse and interest our lady. One would think they had nothing in common. But they are real friends. Come sleep, close your eyes and I'll sing you a lullaby." And the next the Assistant Collector knew was a soft slap on his cheek and Jameela saying, "Wake up. Your tea is here. The world and work await you." Dressing quickly, he went for a moment to the room where his hostess lay asleep, then out to say good-bye to her maid, who asked, "Shall I tell her who you are ?" "Only if you think it will please her, not otherwise. What good luck to have got to know her, and you ! Praise be to God for his infinite blessings, Jameela Banoo. God willing, she and you and I will meet again. For the time being, farewell." And the Assistant Collector rode on to the taluka town and its jail in which the accused was lodged.

## XXI

Having left his horse at a stable in the town the Assistant Collector reached the jail building next to the taluka kacheri just as the Head Warder was double-locking the outer door and making all safe for the night. "You are closing down early, Sir Warder," he said, having first saluted him. "Only fifteen minutes before the due time to be exact," said the Head Warder, "I can assure you fifteen minutes one way or another make little difference to the unfortunates inside, or to me their unfortunate guardian out here." "Ah, but they make a great *deal of difference to me, who have come a long* distance to talk to that under-trial whom you have secured for alleged murder. You would not wish me, I am sure, kind Sir, to hang about all night just to have a word with him in the morning. I regret to trouble you, but please, may I speak to him for a very few minutes? I bear a special message from his father and it is essential that I see him," said the Assistant Collector. "The doors are locked, the keys in my pocket," said the Warder. "Now, I can't reopen without the Taluka Officer's permission. I regret the inconvenience to you, but...." and *he shrugged his shoulders.* "*And where can I* find the Taluka Officer ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Ha, Ha, he's at a camp ten miles away. You must forgive me for smiling, but young cavaliers in a hurry have always amused me," said the Head Warder. "Have they, have they ?" said the Assistant Collector calmly, "I trust you realise that were I not a very law-abiding person with a deep regard for the Sirkar's servants, by now your head would have been adorning the centre of that flower-bed. This is not a threat, just a bald statement of fact, oh man of much experience. I take it the Sirkar's salt has not dried up all the spirit in you. You are still live enough not to refuse a challenge, I hope. The keys in your pocket against this ring on my little finger, with or without weapons, as you choose." "Truly you have a wicked tongue; it is but fitting that I should *break your back," said the Head*

Warder. "Know, oh master of rashness, that you will be facing the best wrestler of this whole district. How do you fight ? As you are or stripped ?" "These clothes I shall need later," said the Assistant Collector, "so I crave your indulgence for a few moments," and undressing quickly he folded and put the clothes and his weapons away on a mat that lay by the side of the wall that was between the kacheri and the jail. Bare except for a brief pair of shorts, he turned round to face the Warder, similarly stripped. A truly powerful fellow, thought the Assistant Collector, now Mind, work well, and Head, keep cool, for in strength he is certainly superior and probably in science too.

Suddenly from his lips there burst forth almost unknowingly the saint-poet's song that begins

"When the mountain falls upon you, youth,
Fall with it.
If you keep your head, you will rise again,
But it will not."

The Head Warder paused in his move forward to grip, and listened amazedly. As the verse ended, he applauded, urging the Assistant Collector to continue. Three more verses the Assistant Collector sang, several men who had gathered round joining in at the last two lines of each. As he ended the third, the Warder stepped forward and hitting him lightly on the chest said, "No, I will not try to break your back. Noble the man who can sing so well that song at such a moment. I'll fetch the keys. Return them to me at leisure when you have done. You will find me in my place in the lines." The Assistant Collector made him a deep bow, then stepped to the wall and put on his clothes again. As he turned from the wall, the Head Warder, who also was by then fully dressed, put the keys in his hand and said, "Your man is in a separate room right at the end of the corridor. Two of the cells have two men in each of them, and two are empty. The occupied cells are locked from the outside. If the men there shout at you, pay no attention. Have your talk and come away quickly. There is a candle in your man's room, so you won't need a lantern." Said the Assistant Collector, "I am greatly obliged to you, Sir. Would you not also come and see that everything is done properly or send one of your assistants ?" "No," said the Head Warder, "I trust you. Only don't be too long and be careful, your man

looks an ugly customer and might well take it into his head to get away himself and leave you in his place." "Many thanks. I'll watch," said the Assistant Collector. He then unlocked the main door, and entering, locked it from the inside. At the end of the corridor he saw some light and walked down towards it. "And who may you be?" said a voice from one of the cells. "Why, you're Death himself. Have you already come to take the murderer?" "Peace be with you," said the Assistant Collector in a solemn voice and passed on.

As he came to the door of the room in which the accused was, a rough voice from inside cried, "Halt, advance no more. I knew not Death had so young a face; in any case my time is not yet, though so weary am I of being cooped up in this wretched place, I would not mind taking you on with my bare hands, accursed Death, just to break the monotony." "It is good," said the Assistant Collector, advancing into the room, "that you realise you are in danger. However, yet you need not fear me. I am not Death himself; I am but the executioner of God's wrath. That you have done enough to arouse divine ire, there's no doubt. I am here to discover however whether you have gone so far as to merit the final penalty. Your father says you did not murder the man you are said to have cut open as he lay asleep beside his mistress, a woman of whom you too have had carnal knowledge in the past, and over whom you actually fought a duel with the deceased. There is no doubt it was your special knife that carved him up and was found bloodied lying beside the corpse. You can see for yourself the case against you is strong. Speak, you killed him? You were jealous of the man who had taken your woman? You wanted revenge?"

"Honoured Sir," said the accused, "since you have made yourself my guest in this bare abode, at least permit me to make you as comfortable as the circumstances allow. Seat yourself on this stool, and let me interpose my pillow between your back and the wall. So. As to your questions, I did not kill the man. True I fought him over the woman, but that was quite a time ago. To tell you the truth, I was a very reluctant rival to him. That minx brought about the fight to make herself more precious to him, a man endowed with far more of the world's treasures than myself. Jealous? God in heaven, why should I be jealous? Did she ever deny herself to me after she went to live with him? I had but to whistle and she met

me in a secret place. She had but to flutter her coloured kerchief from a certain window, and the night was ours. Of love in the real sense both she and I were incapable but we got from each other what we sought. Kill her provider ? I would have been made to do it, with him taking all the burden of her off my hands." "But your knife was the weapon," said the Assistant Collector. "It may have been; I may have dropped it when I spent a night with her or she may have picked it up when she came to the woods with me. I have many hunting-knives; I did not even know this was gone," said the accused. "Say what you will," said the Assistant Collector, "I don't even need to tell you the case looks black for you. However, to the crux; if you were not there that night, you must have been somewhere else. Where ? With whom ? " That I will not answer," said the accused. "Well, hang then, no doubt you deserve hanging in any case," said the Assistant Collector, "unfortunately, since parents love their children, however unworthy, your good father will be deeply distressed. He asked me to help you if I could get the truth out of you. I'll tell him what you say. But I'm sorry for him," and he moved to the door.

"No, listen," said the accused, "provided you want the truth for yourself only, and will never bring it out before anyone else, never in public, in court, or anywhere, to convince you I'll speak. A most wonderful lady is concerned; so you'll understand I'd rather be hung a thousand times than have the least breath of scandal touch her." "I thought you said you were incapable of love," remarked the Assistant Collector. "Oh this is not love, this goes far beyond love," said the accused. "The only proper word is adoration, I think. When our lips meet, when our arms are around one another, even when our bodies mingle, there is a holiness about it all, we seem to have risen far above ourselves, to be reaching the threshold of Heaven itself." "Married ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, a widow, living in a house of her own." "And, feeling thus, you still went on with the amour with another man's kept woman ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "To my shame I admit I did. I've often asked myself why, oh why, do I behave thus ? And have never been able to give myself an answer. What the saint-poet says perhaps, the Angel and the Devil co-existing inside every human's skin. I don't know." "Why didn't you get married to this lady ? A widower and a widow,

well-matched, why not ?" said the Assistant Collector. "Oh, quite impossible. *If I were to tell you who she is, you would see for yourself.* Her brothers, her husband's brothers, would never consent. Why, even if we were to elope together—we often thought of it—not only would we be followed and cut down, but every single member of my family would be killed. They really are most terrible and powerful. *The thousand years they've been great* haven't affected their courage, ruthlessness or pride. Me with my four hundred years, they'd consider a parvenu," said the accused. "Well," said the Assistant Collector, "as things stand, I don't see how we can prevent the case coming to court. All that you say about your continued relationship with the deceased's leman will if you urge it seems to the court to make this blacker against you. You have no real defence. Let's hope your wonderful lady gets to learn of your plight; then, if she really loves you, no doubt she will come and give evidence that you were with her that night. A very good test, it will be too. You'd better give me her name and I'll see that without anyone's intervention, she receives all the information in good time." "To Hell with you, devil," cried the accused. "Do you think I want to be responsible for her murder ? No, let them hang me and be done. And now go, I am tired." "God be with you, sinner," said the Assistant Collector. "Sleep well and don't despair. I don't think you killed the man, so God willing, you may not hang."

As the Assistant Collector walked down the corridor, the man who had spoken to him on his way in called out, "What, Death, going alone. You spared the murderer, did you ? Oh what an age *is this, when even Death fails in his duty !*" "*You have a pretty* wit, friend," said the Assistant Collector stopping. "What keeps you in here ?" "Hist, listen," said the man and from a corner of the cell, where his companion in misery was sitting, came in a classic baritone, a song the Assistant Collector had never heard before, a threnody of sorrow pathetic enough to move the sternest heart. It began

"I have lived too long though I am only twenty-four,
Death, kind Death, gentle in thy severity, gather me in."

and it went on to dilate on all the tragedy of life with always the second line as the refrain at the end of each verse. Spell-bound,

the Assistant Collector listened. When the voice fell silent, after a pause he said, "Wonderful is your rendering of this most heart-rending tragedy, oh voice of Paradise. What is its provenance ?" "Who made it, you mean," said the first prisoner, "Why he himself, he makes songs as he sits there and from time to time sings them, though generally they are so sad, I am compelled to ask him to limit himself to two of an evening." "Sir," said the Assistant Collector, bowing to the man who sat in a corner, "I am greatly your debtor for this exquisite song. Perhaps you would not mind inconveniencing yourself to the extent of approaching the entrance and acquainting me with the circumstances that brought a talent of your calibre here. I ask not out of idle curiosity but with a real desire to be of some service." "If you are Death, take me with you," said the voice from the corner "that is all the service I want. If you are not he, go away."

"I shall answer you," said the Assistant Collector "in the words of the truly great;" and he raised his voice in that noblest of the saint-poet's songs

"Oh spirit of man, exult
for naught can destroy thee,"

the song the saint-poet first uttered in a low, broken voice after the enemy had killed his wife, two sons and a daughter-in-law before his eyes, tortured him with thirty strokes of the bastinade and the tearing off of his toe-nails and left him tied up to die in the company of the serpents that infested the rocks of that area. As the Assistant Collector came to the end of the first stanza, the singer in the corner stirred, then moved forward and joined in the refrain, as did the accused, who came carrying his candle and bringing light into the corridor, the first prisoner in that cell, and the two in the next cell. The second stanza being ended and full justice having been done to the refrain by all the six, the Assistant Collector stopped. "Cursed be he who having begun this noble song ceases before it ends," cried out the accused, and all the others emphatically agreed. "Friends," said the Assistant Collector, "recollect there are eight stanzas more. The evening is drawing in and we all need sleep. Besides I must hear the history of our most distinguished singer and poet here before I leave." "No, no," they shouted in unison "the song, the song." "Well," said the Assistant Collector "the saint-poet

would hardly approve of the listeners to his song being divided from one another by bars. So I shall unlock these doors. Then we can all adjourn to our friend's (the accused) large room, sit down in comfort, finish the song, talk and listen. At the end of the evening I expect you four gentlemen to return to your cells. Is all agreed ?" "Aye, Sir," said the five.

The Assistant Collector unlocked the cell doors. One of the men hesitated before coming out and said, "I think, Sir, I ought to tell the company I am a strangler. So perhaps.." "Your candour does you great credit, Sir," said the Assistant Collector, "but why should your belonging to that ancient profession, which I had thought extinct, prevent you from joining our sociable evening ? You do not seem to have the handkerchief and coin that were I believe the instruments of your art, so I trust we may consider ourselves safe from your ministrations." "Tut, tut," said the strangler, "your notions, I am afraid Sir, are very old-fashioned. I need no handkerchief, no coin. A neck in a certain position, a few, hardly felt movements of my fingers, a corpse. The urge sometimes is irresistible, so I thought I should speak up, especially since you have been so kind." "Sir strangler, you shall walk first and be seated opposite all of us at quite a distance. It would be most culpable to put temptation in your way. But your companion in the cell ? His neck does not seem to have been bent. He too is perhaps of your fraternity?" said the Assistant Collector. "He ! No, Sir, not the spirit for it at all. He is a third cousin and so safe from my attention, that's all" said the strangler. "Let us clear one more point. Your residence here is not because of the exercise of your art?" "Oh, no, Sir, it is almost ridiculous our being here. Imagine, we are simple petty thieves serving a two-month sentence, A giantess, white-haired, keen-eyed, saw me picking a pocket while my friend gave the man a shove. The next moment I was dangling from one hand of hers, he from another. She cracked our skulls together with a force that caused us both to faint and when we came to said, 'Now choose, three double slaps from me or being handed over to the law.' 'Lady,' I said 'the law every time.' She laughed, gave us each a huge, excellent cake out of a basket a maid of hers carried, and then handed us over to the police." "Was she by any chance the noble Zubeida Khanum ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "That

was the name I heard. You too have experienced the power of her hand, perhaps?" asked the strangler. "No," said the Assistant Collector, "I have not had that honour. I only have the privilege of being an acquaintance." After this," said the strangler, "I would like to take service with that lady. Awe of her would I think keep my fingers from necks, however tempting." "God preserve your neck from her grip, friend, if you ever annoy her seriously," said the Assistant Collector.

By the time they were all seated on the thin mat spread over the floor, the strangler in front of and at a distance from the half-circle formed by the other five. The Assistant Collector began again the saint-poet's noble song, and at the end of the first refrain bowed low to the singer, who began the second verse. The marvel of his voice held them all awed, so that they let him take the refrain by himself alone, until with a frown and a gesture he made them all come in. Thus turn and turn about, they completed all the ten verses. And then sat back with the silence that comes from an enjoyable common task well-accomplished. The strangler rose, bowed to them all and, leaving the room, returned with a large flask. From this, with great ceremony, in full sight of all, he poured a draught down his own throat, then handed it over to the Assistant Collector, who taking a large swallow, savoured it carefully, and passing the flask to his right-hand neighbour, said, "My congratulations on your commissariat arrangements, Sir Strangler. An excellent wine, kin to the Shiraz, but lighter in body, as desirable in these parts, I think."

When all had drunk and praised the wine, the strangler said, "A mere trifle, gentlemen, your appreciation overwhelms me. I am by way of being a good pastry-cook, and my reputation having reached the Taluka Officer's wife, one day I was marched off to her kitchen to work with the woman-cook. It was the eldest daughter's birthday they were celebrating and they wanted some very special sweet dishes made. Good, I said, I shall make you a trifle and apricot tarts. Apricot tarts we know, said the woman-cook, but what is a trifle ? That, I said, is the delicious dish which in the South the Shah-in-shah's deputy ends his meal with every Saturday. Bring me these ingredients, not forgetting two flasks of rich wine, most beautiful of cooks, and then go, rest. This is a dish made best in privacy. With much misgiving and consultation with the lady of

the house, the ingredients were supplied. I insisted on the trifle being served separately right at the end of the feast, and its success was instantaneous. They ate, and ate and ate. When they brought me back here, nobody thought of looking below my robe and somehow among other things, this flask also happened to be brought along. Your health, gentlemen," and the flask made another round.

"Now, oh poet of genius, perhaps you will tell us how came you here," said the Assistant Collector. "Yes, Sir, I will," said the inger, "since you have strengthened me with the saint-poet's song and all these gentlemen with their good fellowship. I am a small land-holder. I have always had the gift of poetry and my mother, a notable singer whom my father had carried off in a raid on a neighbouring town, trained me herself and had me trained by an expert in singing. At 21, she told me my voice was superb, and suggested two hours of regular practice in the open every day. One day, far away from all habitation, I was singing a love-song of my own composition and lo & behold, the imaginary maiden to whom I was singing it, stood there right in front of me. When I ended, she stepped forward and kissed me full on the lips. We spent half the day together, then she disappeared. Thus it went on for fifteen days. Then I besought her to marry me. Hush, she said, do you want me to lose you for ever? Meet you and love you, I can; marry you I cannot. After much persuasion, she told me why. She had been married in childhood to the head of her clan. By the time she had grown up, a wound in battle had destroyed his manliness. She was no use to him, so she was allowed to live in her own house on her own estate in charge of a duenna who loved her and let her have her way in most things. Monthly a report went to her husband and sometimes he sent an officer or woman of his own to report to him directly. Half the day thus she could be herself, the other half she must be the great lady. If I wanted to marry, I must find myself another wife. We both wept and continued to meet.

"Once, while we were lying in a wood, my mother, who was a great collector of herbs, came upon us. She and my love took to one another, and soon I was able to slip away at night to my love's room. Happily we went on thus for nearly two years, when she became pregnant. Her duenna was terrified, but my mother gave her courage promising to be with her when the time came,

take the child away and bring it up herself. And so all might have gone, had it not been for a song of mine. Filled with the nearness of fatherhood, I depicted it most joyously. A neighbour hearing me sing it one day, sang it in the next town ascribing it properly to me and so it travelled, reaching in course of time the ears of the head of the clan. Learning it came from the part of the country where his own virgin bride was, he decided to pay her a sudden visit. He arrived, oh accursed fate, at the very moment, a little before midnight when his wife and my beloved delivered a fine healthy boy. The duenna and my mother were attending to her. The boy had been handed over to me and was crying lustily.

"Suddenly there was a rush of armed men into the room, carrying flaming torches. A tall long-bearded warrior, naked sword in hand, cast a terrible look all round him, then said So. He made a sign, six men seized me and tied me to a pillar just opposite the bed. The boy they took from me. "Seize the two women," he said, "and raise that oh so faithful bride of mine so that she can see my kindness to her fruit." And when this had been done, "Toss that in the air." As the child fell back, he neatly cut off its head. His men caught the body and tossed it up again. Both arms, both legs he correctly severed as it descended to the ground. Once again they tossed up the trunk. Exactly in two halves he divided it. Good swordsmanship, I could not help thinking, while my heart was filled with hatred and my mind sick with disgust. "Tear the clothes off these women and lay them here where my bride and her paramour can see them properly. Now a dozen of you to each. Send them to hell full of sex; quite well-preserved they are, both of them.' And the brutal soldiers fell upon the ladies, one after another. My mother, God bless her, somehow got hold of a long dagger which the third man who approached her wore and stabbed him right through the heart. The man behind seeing what had happened and the weapon still in her hand, sent his spear-head through her heart and her agony ended. The poor duenna died with the men still upon her.

"My sweetheart, who had sat through all this without a movement or sound, suddenly looked straight at me and said clearly and loudly, "I love you." "And I you," was my instant reply. "Oh, ho," said the chief; and to his men, "Strip her." There she lay

displayed, the beauty and glory of her incomparable body making even the brutal soldiers lower their heads. The chief approached her, said to me, "Look your full. I won't come in the line of your view" With a side-blow he severed her right breast and flung it on the floor. Followed her left breast. Then it was that somehow my mouth opened and I cursed him in song with a thousand maledictions. He cut off both her hands and then her arms. He drove his blade into her secret parts and cut right through the abdomen. He smiled, and saying "you still love him, do you?" he severed her head from her trunk. Her eyes upon me, my love died. Drawing fresh breath I sang that song of a million curses on him and all with him for ever and ever. They had hit me fiercely about the head and mouth and blood was pouring out but still I sang on. "I'll put the fierce cockerel's eyes out first," he said, his bloody sword-point moving towards my eyes. And then suddenly he gasped and tumbled down and died while my song of curses still went on.

"Some men released me and poured water on my head and face and I still went on cursing as in a trance. A young man came up; he had not been there before and on his face was pity and compassion. "You must bury your dead, mustn't you?" he said "Come, let us gather them together." And while the rest looked on, not knowing what to think, he and I solemnly put together the dead, my son, my love, my mother, the duenna, on separate sheets and carried them out to the lawn of the building. There he said the prayers for the dead, and while the men who had come with him dug graves, I sang a dirge for all four. When we had buried them, he took me by the arm and led me back to the house. Two men stood guard over me and gave me water to drink and then food and wine. Finally the young man came over to me said, "This is the best I have been able to arrange for you. We can't let you go free and we can't let you remain here. This house will be set on fire and your place, too. I have sent off a man of mine to warn your people to leave. You see our people are all frightened of your curses. Besides the old man, two others who had violated your mother, also died. So what we shall do is take you across the border and hand you over to the sirkar's police as a notorious cattle thief. A lot of local people will give evidence of your bad repute. We can fix that. The magistrate will bind you down for two years with sureties, and since no one will stand surety for you, you'll be sent

to jail. After a few months when our people have regained their nerves, I'll arrange two sureties, and you can be free and make a new life there or go elsewhere." I looked at him and said, "No doubt you mean well. But go to Hell. What does anything matter now?" And that has been my state from that day to this, a month later, when I am awaiting transfer to a larger jail."

"A terrible tragedy in truth," said the Assistant Collector. "Tell me, how many sureties were fixed and for what amount?" "Two for five thousand each," was the answer. "Well, tomorrow morning they will appear and as soon as you are freed you will come to the address they give you. They will provide you with a horse and some money, you feel better now, don't you? Yes?" The singer nodded.

"And you, Sir?" said the Assistant Collector to the first prisoner. "Any small service that may be rendered to you?" "I thank your honour," said the man, "but I've been rightly convicted for house-breaking and theft. It's true I hadn't gone there to steal, but what can you contrive when you're making love to a woman and her husband arrives so suddenly that you've no chance to escape? All you can tell her to do is to shriek loudly, 'Thief, thief' and cram the ornaments she has taken off for greater ease into her pockets. I managed to give her a few kisses in between her shrieks and said, 'Give evidence convincingly.' Even then she didn't, she wouldn't say I had threatened her, so I got only six months. Not bad for a simple citizen, what?" All the others, excepting the singer, couldn't help laughing. And so the four were shepherded back into their cells and locked in, and with many a God-speed and Good Luck Befall You hastening him on, the Assistant Collector double-locked the gate from outside and made his way to the Head Warder's quarters to return the keys.

# XXII

Having delivered the keys of the jail with many grateful thanks to the Superintendent and warded off with some difficulty his warm hospital invitation to dinner, the Assistant Collector got his horse from the stable where he had left him and rode out of the town. The moon would come up around midnight but now it was dark and he had to proceed cautiously. So much the better he thought; it gave him more time to think out his course of action. Two sureties must appear tomorrow in court before noon to bail out that most talented and unfortunate singer. That was the first priority and must be settled before the moon rose, for after that he had to clear up the mystery of the murder. His eyes falling on a rather peculiar roadside well, with its white-painted parapet wall set in a hexagon, he recollected that the track by it led five miles on to the manor of the poet whom he had suggested as a husband to the lovely prima donna of the House of Joy. "Well, that settles that," he said to himself, turning into the track. His spirits rising as they generally did on any decision being taken, he broke into song, his subject the pleasure of an evening-ride through fragrant woods, when the familiar takes on strange shapes and the fascinating darkness beckons onwards and forwards.

"Well sung, very well sung," said a cultured resonant voice from the side of the track, making him rein in sharply and look searchingly in the direction from which it had come. "You won't see me unless I choose to be seen, and I won't choose to be seen until you tell me where you are going," said the voice. "I go, gracious lady, to visit that noble chief whose songs make this area the threshold of Paradise itself. And to answer your next question, I go to ask of him a favour which I am hopeful it will not incommode him to do me," said the Assistant Collector. "I shall accompany you there, lively tongue," said the voice. The Assistant Collector felt a slight weight on his right foot, a touch on his waist; the voice, from

behind him on the horse's back, cried out, "Forward." "No little honour is it to be chosen to convey the Queen of Fairies," said the Assistant Collector. The voice laughed, then began to sing the saint-poet's

'Oh for the joy of a quick-witted mind,
If only it be honest.'

At the refrain, a touch from behind indicated that he should join in and he did with gusto. All three verses finished, the voice said, "Your turn now," and the Assistant Collector sang of

"The light-hearted, light-footed lady,
So merry, merry, merry,"

and after four verses ended with the blessing

"At ninety-four, may you be like her
Whose joy in life is perennial,
Her laugh very low, her speech a whisper,
Yet her twinkling eyes merry, merry."

"Whose is that?" said the voice, "I've never heard it, but I like it immensely." "Your Majesty's it is," said the Assistant Collector, "you breathed it into this prosaic brain." "Oh, splendid," cried the voice. "I don't think that can be improved on, so for the rest of the ride, silence." Quietly they continued until the voice said, "You're almost there. Pull up a moment. We may meet again or we may not, but I'll remember your song. And always good fortune." A soft, fragrant palm pressed itself on the Assistant Collector's lips, and almost instantly from behind a tree on the right came the cry, "Ride on." "Clearly an enchanted wood," said the Assistant Collector to himself with a rueful smile. "Anyhow, time presses on."

A furlong further a rough voice called "Halt! and a torch being brought forward, the Assistant Collector saw his way was barred by a group of four, all well-armed. Their leader said, "Your axe, and other weapons, unless you wish to be cut down." "What is this nonsense?" said the Assistant Collector. "Here am I, a law-abiding citizen, come to visit an old friend, the great poet, and I am held up like this! Who are you?" "Your friend's men, Sir, if indeed you are his friend. We are on the lookout for an attack in force and who knows you may be a spy from the other side. So, weapons down please, before you go

any further." "All right then," said the Assistant Collector, "your blood be on your own heads," and he drew his horse back, preparing to charge upon the group, who had got their axes in position. "Stop," cried the voice, speaking as it were from the top of a tall tree. "Fools, he is your master's friend. Let him through. And you, cavalier, restrain yourself or by the splendour of the saint-poet's poetry itself, this goose feather arrow I shall fix in your rash heart." "To hear is to obey. Go on, Sir," said the leader of the group. The Assistant Collector rode on. After a while, the voice which seemed to have kept pace with him, said, "And how do you explain your conduct? Are you so anxious to die that you would have taken on all four together?" "Lady," said the Assistant Collector, "One does not die unless one is meant to, and when one is meant to, no amount of caution will keep one alive. Your humble servant has never surrendered his weapons, whatever the odds against him, and he does not propose to begin now. But may he not have the signal honour of seeing your noble self in person ?" "He may not," said the voice "nor may he make any inquiries about this speaker from his host-to-be or others. Note that carefully, friend. Proceed."

A few minutes later, the Assistant Collector alighted at the main gate and, having handed over his horse to the attendants, entered the great hall, where a concert was in progress. Waiting until the melody being played on the strings had ended, he stepped forward and without a word bowed to the poet. Replying to his salutation the poet said, "Very familiar is your face and stance and yet your name escapes me for the moment. Maybe....?" Bowing again and putting his finger to his lips, the Assistant Collector said, "If I may perhaps have a word or two in private?" Hearing the voice, puzzlement vanished from the poet's face. He darted up from the cushion on which he was sitting and said, "Certainly, certainly, let us go in here. And steward, bring in food and drink at once." Both were brought and rose-water poured over the guest's hands. The servants having left, the poet carefully closed the door and said, "Lord, what do you here in this strange guise ?" "Tell me first what danger are you expecting here ? I came across some of your watchmen," said the Assistant Collector. "It is a thoroughly silly business, really but yes, we are in danger. I wouldn't be surprised if some night brought an attack by two hundred or more from across the border. You must have seen the hall was crowded. I've got my friends and

retainers in too," said the poet. "But this is absurd," said the Assistant Collector. "This is the Sirkar's territory. Why, if they dare to carry on war here, the soldiers will blast them to bits even in their own land."

"Much good that will do to us here," said the poet. "We'll have been killed and the place burnt down long before then. So I made no pleas for Government help but decided to help myself. The cause ? Well, it was this way. In a translation from a foreign book, I read a story about a chief with a long blue beard, who used to marry wives and kill them off, filling up a whole room with their corpses. Somehow it played upon my imagination and after a few days, lo & behold, I had written a twenty-five song series. But a blue beard seemed to me outre. Who wears a blue beard ? No, a beard can only be black, white or red. So I made my hero-villain red-bearded. And do you know twenty miles from here there is just such a fellow with an enormous red beard who has killed (no, they may just have died, I don't really know) nine wives and married a tenth a short while ago? I had never heard of him or his doings. This song series of mine caught on very well; it's fairly recent, so probably it hasn't travelled across the river to you. But a wandering bard sang it at a fair when Red-Beard was there. With great difficulty, he was restrained by all those present from killing the bard, who in terror said he was only singing one of my recent popular compositions, had not the least knowledge that it could hurt anyone and swore he would never sing it again.

"A fortnight ago a very tough-looking cousin of Red-Beard's came to see me, demand an apology, proper compensation, and a promise to suppress the songs. I said, I knew nothing about your cousin when I wrote these songs, however I am very sorry they should have been misinterpreted to apply to him. Having committed no offence against your cousin, no compensation is due to him from me. Still, his feelings having been hurt I, admitting no claim, am prepared to give him the special hand-illuminated volume of my poems, one of only twenty that were recently made by a great calligraphist. Also, this gold-embossed volume of Firdosi. So you have the apology and the compensation. As to suppressing the song series, that is beyond my power. A song is not a person. You can't cut off its head; you can't keep it in prison. It is like the air. Once

out, it flies where it will. It lives in people's minds, it spreads on their tongues. Please explain all this to your cousin and assure him of the great esteem I have always had for his noble house. A week ago, two of our men were killed on an outlying farm, the farm house burnt down and a message left, 'This is the beginning.'"

"Do you think they'll attack in force to-night?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, to-night we're safe. The moon will soon be up. I think they'll wait for the dark nights. But one can't take any chances, can one?" said the poet. "Well, if Red-Beard doesn't act to-night, if will be my business to see that, God willing, he does not act at all. Paper and ink please and your best horseman to hand over as quickly as possible to Pribhdasji at my camp the note I am going to write just now. I take it very ill, oh master of imagination, that in this extremity the thought of me did not cross your mind, yes, very ill, indeed. However you are our best poet and so stand excused; no doubt your mind was busy with some new form of verse." And the Assistant Collector started writing. Finishing he sealed the envelope with his own seal, and handed it over to the poet saying, "Put it in another envelope, address that yourself, and despatch the messenger. I do not want your people to know I am here." "Yes, lord," said the poet, and leaving the room did accordingly.

Returning he said, "I did think of you, but we are not in your territory; also I knew you would rush into danger if you heard of it, and is it for me, I said to myself, to endanger your life for my poor sake?" "God in Heaven, man," said the Assistant Collector. "Don't make me angry, or I won't be able to ask you to be surety yourself and provide another for a singer with a golden voice, who after the most tragic incident finds himself in jail as a notorious cattle-thief. He is quite innocent, of course. Listen, I'll tell you his story." And the Assistant Collector related the whole account. "I shall be delighted to help an unfortunate and gifted man, lord," said the poet. "Early tomorrow I shall set out for the town with my cousin, who is quite a good zemindar too and we shall both stand sureties for him. The police will be somewhat surprised at our appearing in such a role, but I shall let them think he is a distant cousin and we only came to know about his imprisonment yesterday.

Where do you want him to go, once he is free? If you like, he can stay here with me, until you and he have decided his future." "That is very good of you, I thank you. I really haven't had much time to think with so many things happening. Yes, bring him here. The atmosphere ought to be very suitable. He doesn't know who I am; so don't tell him. Next week I'll come over to see him or send for him to camp," said the Assistant Collector.

"Now about yourself, You're still unmarried ? Good. You ought to get married. You agree ? Good. You want to get married. Yes ? Good. You have found the woman you want to marry. No ? Good. Your heart is not set on any particular woman. Is that correct ? Good. Well, recently I heard a very great singer, later I talked to her. A voice the angels in Heaven might envy, a mind subtle but straightforward, in appearance a ravishing beauty, yet with poise and true dignity. The thought came to me this was the ideal wife for you. Tomorrow this lady will be going to stay with the old nurse at X, a valued friend of mine. I suggest the day after you go and meet her. Tell nurse I sent you. If you are interested and think she is interested and she does not tell you all about her life, come and see me before you do anything. Now, all I will tell you is I saw her in the House of Joy at the city. If that straight-way puts you off, don't trouble to visit nurse at all. For the last year, she has lived entirely on the earnings of her singing, though residing in the House of Joy. Think it over before you curse me for the idea. The lotus, the flower of the essence of light and fragrance, comes out of the filthiest mud of the lake, remember that. Well, these were the two matters I wanted to lay before you. Now, give me leave to depart. God be kind to you ! May all your enemies be reduced to tears and all your friends prove sincere !" The Assistant Collector bowed and made for the door. "Lord," said the poet, barring his way, "it is very late now. The night is full of dangers. Please sleep here till the morning. Or if you must go, take me with yourself. Do not go alone." "Who sang, oh poet," said the Assistant Collector

'The night is friendly
To the pure of heart.
Far better than the garish day
It serves the innocent.

The seeker after justice
In its darkness sees secrets,
The bright day has left hidden
Oh night, just, strong, adorable, heavenly night!'

Was it not that prince of all poets who lives in this delight of all the senses?" And singing the second verse of the song at the top of his voice, he made his way through the hall to the entrance, then round to the stables, where his horse stood ready, fed, watered and freshly groomed. Vaulting into the saddle, he took the track back.

He had gone but a little way, when the voice said, "And whither now?" "To my devoir," answered the Assistant Collector. "And what is that?" asked the voice. "Nothing lovely, nothing pleasant. Just clearing up a murder." "So that is why you wear the uniform of death," said the voice. "Aye, that is why, I am the executioner of God's wrath," said the Assistant Collector. "God have mercy on your victims, Sir, executioner," said the voice. "I pray so too," said the Assistant Collector. "I ride with you," said the voice from behind him. "No, lady, no," said the Assistant Collector, bringing his steed to a standstill. "This is a dreadful business I have in hand, not fit for you to witness. Please listen and go your way in peace." "Ha, ha, ha," laughed the voice mockingly, "Dreadful you say! Shall I show you the most horrible thing in the world? I know it well, so nothing else is dreadful to me. Shall I make you run in horror like any coward, oh bravest of the brave? Tell me, shall I?" "As you please, lady," said the Assistant Collector. "Ah, the moon comes to provide light for the spectacle. Now wait," said the voice. Suddenly in a moonlit patch in front of him appeared a black-sheeted figure. Slowly it disclosed two perfect arms, a lovely body, a swan-like neck. Then with an awful snarl, it uncovered its face. A visage of true horror, creased and burnt and twisted and ugly beyond description, every feature at odds with every other, the tongue lolling out madly, the eyes like a tigress's, staring and seeking to devour. The horse trembled in fear and attempted turn and flee. The Assistant Collector jumped off his back, turned his round, tied the reins to a tree and gentled him into some kind of comfort. Then turned again to the face. As its full impact made itself felt, he found himself repeating the first short prayer of his faith. Then slowly, step by step, he walked up, his eyes fixed on the

eyes of the face. Muttering the battle-cry of his ancestors, 'Aid, Lord Almighty, Aid' he came quite close to the figure, then slowly raised his hand to the scabrous cheek and patting it said, "God bless you, dear child." The tongue moved back into the mouth, the eyes seemed to grow a little less wild. Leaning forward the Assistant Collector brought his lips into contact with that creased and ridged forehead of horror, and kissing it said, "Sweetest of women, God comfort you." Swaying, the woman bent down on her knees, then fell in a faint to the ground. Getting some water from a pool nearby the Assistant Collector bathed the face. Reviving, she said, "Surely, I am in Paradise. Were you washing my face, cavalier?" "Yes, you just fainted, lady. I hope you're feeling better," said the Assistant Collector. "You were not disgusted by it? You did not rush away in horror ? No, I know you did not. You patted my cheek, you kissed my forehead. How could you, oh how could you? Everyone flees at the sight of me. That is why I am always in hiding and live by myself. Explain, how dared you face me ?" said the woman.

"Illness, kindest of women," said the Assistant Collector, "is no one's fault, no crime. Sometimes illness has strange results. Yours, whatever it was, has given your face this odd appearance. Let us agree, you and I, your face is not pleasant to look at, it may well frighten people. But you, the essential you, have not become different. You are what you have always been, a most gracious and wonderful person. God helped me to see the reality under the husk, the true you, and so I was not frightened, that is all. Come now, what shall we do ? Shall I take you to your house and wait by you until you fall asleep ? Or shall I go on now and come tomorrow early in the morning to have breakfast with you and an hour's talk ? As you wish, dear child." "Child, indeed ! Good Sir. I would have you know I am nearly twenty-two," said the lady, "Excellent, then you have attained years of discretion, and wisdom is at your beck and call if only you will occasionally consult it. Tell me then, dear grown-up, I await your commands," said the Assistant Collector. "Well, if the task you have to perform is over, your mind will be freer and we can talk better, so let it be tomorrow morning for breakfast. Come as soon as you can. I am always up with the dawn. God protect you and please, don't run into danger. I know your philosophy, but still there's a difference. Face danger

by all manner of means, if it comes, but don't go out of your way to seek it. You follow don't you, most formidable ?" said the lady. "I do, gracious lady, and your house is ?" asked the Assistant Collector. "The next turning to the right of the track as we go to the big place. Yes, you'll be able to find my little cottage without difficulty. You have given me new life today, oh Isa," said the woman. The Assistant Collector mounted and with a wave of his hand, rode off.

His destination the house of the deceased, was two and a half miles away. His purpose would be to get an entrance quietly into the house and then into the bathroom of the owner's mistress to make her tell her story and examine her upon it. For the most part, he must play it by ear. If he were caught, if she screamed thief, he would be finished. Ah well, he said, faint heart never completed a good job. It was too late for him to be thinking of risks. At a mile's distance from the house, he dismounted, tied his horse to the pole of a shed near a well, made him comfortable with hay in the shed, patted his neck, and quietly slipped into the field, merging in his full black with the shadows in the landscape. Carefully he made his way to the house, meeting no one on the way. Twice he went round the house, seeking a point of entry. Two windows on the ground floor seemed possible. He tried one, but heard snores from behind it. The other opened into an empty corridor. Slipping in, he stood listening, then moved on to the stairs, for the bedrooms he knew would most probably be on the first floor.

## XXIII

Having ascended without mishap to the first floor, the Assistant Collector paused at the top of the stairs to get his bearings. Four doors opened out of the corridor in which he stood; one, carved and decorated with the Farhad-Shirin motif he had often seen in illuminated editions of the classics, was obviously that of the main bedroom. In view of the recent murder of the owner in it, most

probably it would not be occupied. The other three he must check. Very quietly, he tried first the door of the left end room. It opened easily to disclose no one on the bed in the centre or at the window through which the moonlight streamed in. Next to the right end bedroom, again empty. Praise be to God, he thought, now if she's in the room next to the main bed-room nobody is likely to burst in on our encounter. Moving to that door he paused and laying his ear against a panel, listened. Falling back, he turned the cloak around, displaying the blood-red side, then slowly inched the door open. Yes, she was there and alone. Stepping in quickly he eased the door to behind him. On a high divan a few paces from him lay in deep slumber one of those specimens of the female form great sculptors and painters would have vied with one another to model from. On her back she slept, a diaphanous silk robe her only covering, her long hair a nimbus round her head and the upper part of her body. Watching her smooth, open face, her high intellectual forehead, her easy relaxed breathing, the thought came to the Assistant Collector, " A murderess, she ? No." However, to the test she must be put. That after all was what he was here for.

So very softly he moved to the side of the divan and let the point of his black dagger touch the front of her neck. A slight quiver of the body and her sleep continued. A harder touch, a pricking, and her eyes opened, horror dawning in them as she saw the grim, motionless figure at the side of the divan, its eyes staring fixedly into hers. A voice, harsh and horrible, stated, " You killed your lover. You cut him open as he lay with you in your sleep. Your cousin-paramour had gone nowhere. He was with you and helped in the killing. Answer." And the dagger touched the gullet again, firmly and a little fiercely. " You know all, yes, I did, " came in a choked voice. "But please do not kill me now, please do not. He was a rotten man. He deserved killing. Please." "The executioner of God's wrath does not argue. He punishes. Say your last prayers, woman. Your end is very near," said the harsh voice. A sudden wave of energy seemed to fill the woman. With a bound she sat up thrusting aside the dagger at her throat and burst out, " Listen; you must; I never repented anything so much as coming away with this man. He was vicious and cruel. Never when I wanted love, would he be adequate. Always he must have his way, I must be just an instrument. He would beat me on the buttocks till I could scarce

lie down and then want to make love to me, beating me again and again till I lay helpless and he could have his will. I am a great courtesan, a woman incomparable; I please the most fastidious and aim to be pleased myself. And this Devil! I fear Hell no longer after the life he led me. Justice, God's servant, be just and you cannot kill me now." "And," said the harsh voice, thrusting her down flat upon the bed again with a push, and resettling the dagger at her throat, "you used the hunting-knife of one of your other lovers for the killing, so that he now lies accused in jail and is very likely to hang. Justice, woman? The wage of triple sin may not be triple death, but single death it certain is. You have five minutes, no more, for your last prayers. Repent and die." "Listen, Mighty One," cried the woman, "I will repair that sin, aye gladly, too, for he was a lovely lover, that one, always so gay and happy-go-lucky, and how he pleasured me! Yes, if there's anything I really repent, it is getting him into trouble. Come, be merciful, kill me not now, I'll write out a full confession and exonerate the man in jail. Then with that you can hand me over to the authorities. Leave me to the world's justice, oh God's Executioner! If you bury your dagger in my throat, he is bound to hang anyway. Your voice is harsh and glance stern, yet you look a true cavalier, one more apt to kiss a woman to life than stab her to death. Be yourself," and she looked at him bewilderingly.

"Get up," said the Assistant Collector, and as she got up, displaying her figure to full advantage, he draped a heavy covering around her shoulders. Pointing to a cushion on the floor by which stood a low desk with on it paper, ink and a goose-quill he said, "Sit and write." Smiling up at him, she started. Kneeling by her, dagger still in hand, he followed her writing. She made a full confession except for the part played in the murder by her cousin. Finishing and signing she said, "There, that ought to satisfy anyone. I'm sure they'll hang me. Still, who knows? This face, this figure and money enough to get very clever lawyers, who knows? You mustn't mind my not bringing my cousin into this. Even I must love truly someone." Disgust and awe fought with one another in the Assistant Collector's mind. Here truly was the feminine incarnate in its most vicious form, woman the destroyer, yet woman the preserver of the worst. But all he said, picking up the confession, was "Come." "I must dress, mustn't I? And you must turn your back on me so

that I can do it in peace," said the woman. "Splendour of God," said the Assistant Collector, "realise, oh witch, I do not trust you in the least. "Come as you are or get into your clothes, but out of my sight you will not be for a second." "Oh, well," was the answer, "after all you are not the first voyeur I've pleased, to look all you can." And tantalisingly, with all the studied coquetry of the courtesan, she began to dress herself.

Almost ready, she bent down to put on her shoes, then suddenly stretched herself to her full height and lifting with her left hand the lid of a small box she had in her right, flung the box straight at the Assistant Collector, about six feet away. Startled, he swivelled round on his toes, his flowing cloak striking the box and diverting it from the intended target, his neck and face. As the box fell to the ground, he saw moving up his tunic the most dreaded scorpion of the province, one whose sting is certain, instant, death. Automatically the dagger in his hand moved to prise it off the tunic on to the floor, where it could be crushed to death under his heel. Instead however of its falling to the ground, it go' flung off horizontally, struck the woman on her bosom and buried its sting in her, all in the twinkling of an eyelid. Slowly, she slid on to the divan, then as the Assistant Collector moved swiftly upto her, said, "Truly executioner," and her eyes glazed over. Gripping the scorpion with a blanket, the Assistant Collector pulled it off its victim's body and stamped on it, killing it. Slowly and solemnly, he then lifted the woman's feet up from the ground and arranged the body properly on the divan. Gently closing her staring eyes, he murmured, "You wonderful woman, superb in your own genre, true ravisher of hearts! God Almighty, why having given her such beauty did you give her such a temperament? It was not your fault, most lovely, not your fault, only your misfortune. God will be merciful to you, oh yes, he will be merciful," and from his lips there came the words of the prayer asking forgiveness for the sins of the dead. As he stood by the body, head bent, some sixth sense suddenly sent a warning to his mind and he sank down on his knees to see an axe completing a circular movement that would have taken his head off had he still been standing. Snatching the daggers from his belt, his axe not being ready for use, he whirled round to see a strongly-built, wild-eyed youth, recovering his foothold and coming straight at him axe aloft. This was serious, for he could not hope in that confined space to avoid the

axe for long, and his own reach was too restricted to be able to touch the opponent. There was only one thing possible. As the young man poised his axe, the Assistant Collector jumped in on him, a dagger in each hand, and with the impetus of the jump, in smooth instantaneous movements, planted the dagger in the front and back of the youth's neck. Down he went with a crash and a glance showed the Assistant Collector the man was dead or would very soon be. "The cousin-paramour," he thought, and in the changed circumstances holding it best to leave the confession where it had been written, he placed it carefully on the low desk, put a weight on top of it, and picking up his axe, slipped into the empty end-room, next to the one in which he was.

Voices were already rising from below and he heard among them one undoubtedly of a guardian of the law, who had probably been posted there after the murder, just in case. Turning over his cloak to hide the crimson side, he discovered he needn't trouble, for the front of his tunic down almost to the waist was covered with patches of blood probably from the flush that had come from the dagger planted in front. Quietly opening a window he slipped out at the back and with the help of the creepers fortunately growing there, was soon on the ground, making his way as secretly as he could to the shed where he had left his horse. Two murderers killed in less than an hour, he thought, truly had he been the Executioner of God's wrath that night. "Not willingly, though, not willingly, Lord. I would have been content to take her in with the confession and let it fight it out with the law. And I didn't even intend her to get bitten by that monster. And as for the youth, it was my life or his and so there was no help for it." And softly he began to sing the saint-poet's great hymn about the Justice of the Lord.

"Glory in the highest to the Justice of the Lord,
Like a thunder-storm it cometh out of the bluest sky;
Flushed with pride, the great criminals smile,
Enjoying the fruits of their sins,
Lo and behold, they are levelled flat
By the Justice of the Lord."

As he reached the shed where he had left his horse, a great thirst came upon him. Drawing water from the well he drank huge

draughts, and sluiced it over his head and hands. The stench of blood from his clothes displeased him and he would have loved to have thrown them off and poured water all over himself, but he had no other clothes and these must do until tomorrow, so he stretched himself out in the hay as he was and in a couple of minutes was sound asleep. Waking with the call of the birds at the first dawn, he too joined their morning prayers, thanking God for having let him fulfil the task he had undertaken at the old nobleman's request.

"And now for breakfast with the Voice," he said, mounting and riding slowly across the still dark landscape. He had reached the turning she had indicated, when from the right came her call. Stopping, he made to get off, but she said, "No, I ride with you," and then from behind him, "And your devoir?" "Fulfilled, lady," said he heavily. "Why then sad?" she asked. "Two died," he answered. "They deserved to?" "Yes, you may say so," said he. "Come then, be cheerful," she advised and began to sing:

"Not yet dead the Devil, friends,
His earthly servants, oh kill, do kill.
Would you to the evil be good?
Then what would you be to the good?"

"Join in," she said. "I cannot," said the Assistant Collector. "Was she very beautiful?" she asked. "Beautiful perhaps not, attractive very," he said. "And you lost your heart to her?" "No, not at all, I only feel as one does when a rose, lovely and living, suddenly is picked from the garden where one has admired it. A sense of shock, of surprise, of sorrow," said he. "You killed her?" she asked. "In a way," he answered, "she threw a karara at my face. It lighted on my tunic, I tried to throw it on the ground, instead it lighted on her breast. It stung, she died." "But it's absurd your blaming yourself for that. Ah, I've got it. The smell of stale blood is in your nostrils. That brings sadness, madness or both. Where is it from? Your clothes, you must get rid of them at once," she said. "But I have no others and I must ride across the river to-day," he answered. "Cavalier, soon I shall call you a fuss-pot. Leave your clothes to me. Now get off just here. Ten paces to the right is a wonderful pool, deep and clear; drop your clothes on the bank and plunge into that. When come out, put on the dress you find hanging on a tree nearby and come in for breakfast."

The Assistant Collector jumped off his horse, which disappeared round a bend before he even says thank you. The pool stay still, not a ripple on its surface. Getting out of his clothes, he plunged into it, the coolth of the water driving for a few moments all the breath out of his body and making his teeth chatter. A few vigorous strokes made him feel alive again and a quarter of an hour later he emerged greatly refreshed, to find on the branch of a tree nearby a uniform that in the variety of its colours left Joseph's famous coat far behind. Chuckling, he got into the yellow baggy trousers with green stripes on the side, held in place by a crimson cummerbund, above which rose a dark blue bodied tunic with light blue sleeves. His shoes were as he left them though they looked cleaned, so he put them on. Feeling a perfect popinjay, but exceedingly cheerful, he marched up at a military pace to the little house on the verandah of which the lady in the mask stood, and saluted her with the utmost precision. "Very fine," she said, "you don't know how much better these gay colours suit you. Come in, breakfast is ready. Your clothes by the way I shall have burnt later; no regrets?" "None at all, lady," he said "they served their turn. The executioner of God's wrath has retired from business. Pray God he may not have to take to work again."

"Amen," she said, "now here are hot milk and currant bread and hot **parathas** and if you like meat, there are venison strips. May your appetite be good." Sitting down, the Assistant Collector helped himself liberally, then stopped and said, "But you?" "I shall eat later," she said. "Look, dear friend, I know you mean well, but the sight of me eating is enough to drive any sane person crazy. My face, ugly enough at the best of times, makes such contortions that you would run screaming from the room. And I wish you to make a good breakfast." Saying nothing, the Assistant Collector moved behind her and whipped the slitted silk mask she wore off her face. Then taking her by the shoulders, he put her into a seat at the table and filled a platter with viands for her. Taking his seat opposite her, he looked at her steadily and said, raising a cup of milk, "your health, dear Voice, for that is my name for you. Now drink." With her eyes on him she drank. Her hideous face became truly grotesque as she drank, but the Assistant Collector smiled and praised the currant loaf and the venison and asking a thousand questions about who shot the deer, how long the haunch was hung,

why the quality of milk differed almost every twenty miles, soon had her eating and talking and laughing. Almost she seemed to forget her affliction.

When they had finished and were seated on the verandah she said, "Thank you for the first meal I have truly enjoyed since I was thirteen and a half. I am the first cousin of our poet-chief you visited last night. My father's mansion is four miles from his. My eldest brother rules it now. I lived there very happily with father, mother, two elder brothers and a young sister, until I began to grow into a woman. Then this dreadful thing started. Almost distraught, my mother tried every possible remedy, consulted everyone she could get to know of. At the end of a year, however, it seemed clear my condition was permanent. I could no longer abide their distress when my family's eyes fell on me and so adopted this mask. Shortly afterwards I met my cousin out shooting and it struck both him and me as I talked to him that since I could not hope for a normal life, I had to find some occupation. He was impressed by my knowledge of woods and forests, game and animals and crops, and asked me to manage his estate as his mind was often occupied by things very different. He wanted me to go and live at the house. I said I would not, I did not want his wife to miscarry because she had by accident had a glimpse of my face. He laughed and said, 'Well, then I'll show you a little house near ours where I wrote my first poem. You will find it sympathetic,' and so at fourteen and a half I came here. You know this mask and the general secrecy in which I live have been a great asset in the management of the estate. People think I have some magic, so they obey my commands without question and they always tell me the truth. And of course some strange skills also come to me, perhaps from living alone and frequenting the forest at any hour of the night and day. For instance." A nightingale's liquid note arose as it were from the Assistant Collector's left shoulder, almost as if the songster had been perched upon it. When the last trill had died down, from the roof came the sigh of an old woman and a cracked voice said, "The nightingale like life itself lies. Living in pain, it is sorrow, not love, not joy." And then from half way down the right wall the bubbling roll of the blue jay arose. And all the time, there had been no movement of the lady's lips or change in her countenance.

14

"But this is wonderful," cried the Assistant Collector "many a man would give his fortune for this art." "Yes, it can be useful too sometimes. About a year ago I came secretly to know that a party of fifty were preparing to raid the village in which lived my foster-sister. She is very beautiful and alas, very vain; at a nearby fair she had made some slighting remarks about the appearance of the new bride of the headman of the party. The bride heard about it, and told her husband she just could not rest content until he seized my foster-sister and made a present of her to his wife to serve as her maid. So angry was she that she even said she would not mind his enjoying the beautiful victim, if only she could make her feel what slighting his wife involved. The husband, fearing my cousin's wrath, tried to make her forget her anger but she would not and finally began to deny him her company, saying if he could not do this simple thing for her, he obviously hated her and might as well divorce her. The young men of the party were all for the raid. Besides my foster-sister, there were many very good-looking girls in the village, and they all looked forward to brides with no bride-price to pay. I heard all this on the morning of the day, for the night of which the expedition had been planned. And old, ugly bag of a beggar-woman, back from pilgrimage to a shrine in the neighbourhood sanctified by the saint-poet's residence there for several years of exile, rested at the local almshouse shed that noon. Between noon and five in the evening, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field began to speak in that village. Death they prophesied and utter ruin if any man left the village that night. The headman's wife heard a fieldmouse say that she was as good as a widow already, was going to be seized by the enemy that night and would almost certainly be sold to a brothel-keeper. At six the elders decided there would be no raid. The old beggar-woman gave a piece of her mind to the headman, telling him he was a fool and his wife another. Did one go to war because a foolish woman's vanity was offended? You know how it is with us. If you are old and ugly and helpless and appear with the aura of possessionlessness, you can say almost anything to the most powerful and get away with it. They listened and cursed but behaved for the future.

"Returning home I sent for my foster-sister. She would not have come, tried to make excuses about her second son's health,

but my foster-mother insisted that if in all these years I had sent for her only then, there must be a good reason and she must go. She came in the afternoon. I had my mask on. I told her of what her foolish tongue would have led her and her people into, and advised her to give up her vanity. Filled with pride, she sneered at me. Whipping off my mask, I looked at her. With an agonised cry, she turned to flee. I took her by the arms, pushed her on to a stool and brought my face nearer and nearer to hers until I was almost touching her, then said, 'Look, fool, this too was a beautiful face once. Give up being vain about your beauty. It will in any case not last for ever. And for your own sake don't make sneering remarks about other women. Do you promise? Shaken with sobs, she did. I reassumed my mask, made her wash her face, gave her food and drink and talked about other things. She remained very uneasy, so I sent her home. Later my foster-mother sent a message through a servant visiting her that my foster-sister had changed very considerably for the better since her visit to me. She suggested I might like to go and spend a few days with her. Dear foster-mother, who kept me alive with her milk, she has no idea how frightful I look now !"

"Be that at it may," said the Assistant Collector, "your deeds are handsome, you lead a life of great usefulness, you are helpful to so many, and as the poet has it

Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.

"Which poet is that" she asked. "I have never heard that before." "An English poet, lady," said the Assistant Collector translated freely the poem of which these lines are the end. "Wonderful," she cried, "I did not think that cold people could have such poetry." "They have, lady, they have the best in the world, many would say. Nor are they as cold as many think. Their men can fight with zest, their women love with passion." said the Assistant Collector. "You speak no doubt from experience," she said. "Be that as it may . . ." "A most useful formula, that next time I am taxed with anything, e. g. my cousin demanding sternly, Did you give away the Navroz dinner I sent you to the orphan's school ? or Did you hide that murderous miscreant for two days and take the risk of being murdered your-

self? All I shall do is bow low and say 'be that at it may, the saplings we planted in the new orchard are ready for transplanting and I propose to set them out here and here and here, look at the plan, please' I am sure he will be delighted." They both burst out laughing.

The Assistant Collector resumed, "Be that at it may, as I was saying two things it seems to me may be worthy of your attention. One, visit an old friend of mine, an aged nurse who lives twenty miles away. Tell her the man with the curls, the man with the tin pannikin, sent you. Give her all the details about your affliction, let her examine you. She may be able to do nothing, but she is an expert in the human body, and in the human mind, too. You and she will get on well together, I am sure, for there is no humbug in you at all, you are genuine all through. She likes genuine people and so will help you all she can. Your cousin may perhaps be going there tomorrow or day after, so it would be best if you went after that. By the way, how do you react to the possibility of his marriage?" "Why, I think he certainly should marry as soon as possible. If only he could get a wife worthy of him, a woman beautiful and stately, a first-rate singer, a true appreciator of poetry, good deep down in her heart, and a breeder of fine children. Can such a combination be, I sometimes ask myself, as I listen to the splendid love-songs to imaginary inamoratas by him that get carried all over the countryside by the bards. He has genius, you know, the only *one of our* line who has ever had it, and may well fall *into* melancholy if there is no external focus for the love that wells in his heart," said she. "Well done, oh very well done, dear Voice, you have an excellent understanding of men's natures and I am sure Nurse will find you very good company. As to your cousin, the Lord works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform, so do not despair. You will go to Nurse?" "Yes, I will, next week I think," she said. "Good. Now point two. I will send you books and explanations and you will start learning English. It can scarcely defy a mind which can so well converse in the language of the birds of *the air and the animals of the earth. No, you will soon learn to read* and understand it and then what a new world of delight will open out before you, its poetry, its drama, its tales, even its serious discourses. You may ask, what use will it be to me? In its apparent uselessness to you, is its real use to you. It will take your mind away from

yourself, and it will be a new form of enjoyment. Will you try ? Week after next the books will be with you, if you like." "Of course I will, I did not call you Isa for nothing. See all the time we have been talking, I haven't even noticed my mask was not on. Yes, I will try."

"God protect you, dear Voice, and good fortune for ever attend you. I must leave, but before I do, one question. This royal uniform, for which a thousand, thousand thanks, how came it here?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes," said the Voice, looking critically at it on him, "A trifle loose in places, but on the whole well-fitting. A cousin of my father's, a most romantic youth, whose love-affairs were equalled only by the duels he fought, a great swordsman he was, after a particularly hectic incident, for which my grandfather avoided a serious blood-feud only by the most handsome and instant compensation, just disappeared from sight. Twenty years later a caravan from the North brought a wooden chest to my father. With it was a letter to the heirs of my cousin, "Superb and Indomitable General of the ever-Victorious Cavalry of the Sublime Porte," who had while gloriously leading a charge against a much larger body of the savages of the North, and scattering it been killed in action. The letter said the General had acquired great fame by his daring, his skill in strategy, and his fearlessness before superiors. He spoke his mind in even the highest quarters, and was invariably forgiven for his frankness. So though he always spent all his pay and the loot he took and at the time of his death was not worth even half-a-gold coin, the court, in memory of him, sent to his heirs two necklaces of diamonds and rubies, a sword of honour, and a uniform. My father and uncle kept the necklaces, my uncle being the better swordsman the sword. The uniform, being too outre for them or their sons, remained wrapped in rough cloth and tobacco-leaf at the bottom of the chase which I appropriated to bring my things over when I came to live here. Most impressed was I with its colourfulness when I discovered it on unpacking the chest and since then almost every year, I have sunned and aired it. To good purpose it would seem now, since it today clothes a cavalier as gallant, courageous and resourceful as my father's cousin though more modest and sensible."

The Assistant Collector made her low bow, then taking her right hand, kissed it, and said, "In thinking me worthy to wear

your noble cousin's uniform, you do me great honour, lady." "For the head alas," she said, "I have nothing. There is of course your black 'dastar' but the ends are dappled with blood. Stay, I remember an old karakul cap that might just do. Whose it was I know not, but the last time I saw it, it seemed quite serviceable." Going inside she came back after a few minutes and handed the cap over. The Assistant Collector set it straight on his head and found it a *comfortable fit.* "*Teh,*" *said* the Voice, "*sit down, will you,* and let me adjust the cap properly. One does not wear a karakul as if it were just ordinary headgear. One tilts it slightly to make it quite clear none touches it or its wearer with impunity. There now you are truly ready, Sir, except of course for the weapon. This uniform needs a flashing sword in a shining scabbard to set it off. However, that we haven't, so your grim axe must do. I'll get your horse brought round, but before that I must resume my mask. My groom and *your horse* must not be *frightened.*" The Assistant Collector stood looking after her, a prayer upon his lips for one so lively of mind and body on whom so great a burden had been laid. Vaulting into the saddle he trotted to the corner up to which the eye could see from the verandah. There turning, he charged with a ferocity the owner of the uniform he wore might well have applauded. Coming to a dead halt just opposite the spot on the verandah where she stood, he bowed so low to her that his karakul touched his horse's mane. Thus he stayed a moment, then resuming his original position, drew the horse slowly back five paces, his right hand throughout at the salute. There he halted a moment. Then with the cry of ah, ha, ha, ah, the most famous of the past champions of this part of the country had used in battle, and twirl of his right hand above his head, he galloped away.

## XXIV

Slackening speed as he turned into the main track, the Assistant Collector wondered at himself. What in Heaven's name had made him indulge in these strange antics? True, the morale of the Voice who had suffered grievously, had to be boosted, but that had already been done by the time he mounted to depart. Why then that full charge, the dead halt that had turned his horse and him into a statue, the slow pace by pace movement backwards, the shouted battle-cry as he galloped away? The answer came to him as, passing the six-sided well, he entered the high road to see half-a-dozen riders coming from the opposite direction stop suddenly and call out, "Oh amazingly-dressed cavalier, kindly introduce yourself." Normally he too would have stopped and given a courteous answer for there was no reason to suppose they were enemies and meant him harm. But, now, the blood rushed to the head beneath the karakul and he charged straight at them, scattering the crowd and bursting through with no damage to himself except a slight graze on the left leg. Hearing no sounds of pursuit, he fell into a trot after a few minutes and, taking the cap off, said, "God in Heaven, it is this uniform and the karakul that are making me behave thus. Their last owners obviously loved panache and preferred a blow to a word, and the impress of their strong personalities seems to have been conveyed to their present wearer. I'd better change as quickly as possible into clothes less charged with the spirit of anger."

Seeing a cottage half-a-furlong away, standing by itself in a field, he rode to it and jumping down, said loudly, "Peace be with the owner of this abode." An impressive-featured long-bearded old man came out and returning the salutation desired to know what the chief wanted. "Clothes, friend, simple as the ones you wear, and a place in which to leave these safely behind," said the Assistant Collector. "Have you killed then today and are they in

pursuit?" asked the old man. "Be angry if you will, Sir, but I help no murderers." Keeping a tight check on the rage that was rising within him, the Assistant Collector said, "By the grace of God, this morning none has fallen at my hands, but if I do not get out of this uniform at once, who knows what may not happen." "I see," said the old man, "come in, come in and take your clothes off." A simple string-bed and a prayer-mat were all the bare room held. The Assistant Collector stripped and covering himself with a hand-spun blanket that had been lying folded at the end of the bed, sat down heaving a sigh of relief. Looking up, he found the old man, who he had thought was outside, in front of him, a bare sword in his hand. "The truth now," he said, "or I will kill you myself and bury you in this field. When have you murdered?" The Assistant Collector smiled at him and said, "Look into my eyes, wise man, look carefully and if you still hold I am a murderer, do as you will." For a long, long minute the old man gazed fixedly at the Assistant Collector, who returned his look without blinking. He then put away his sword and said. "A true man I see you to be, I shall give you a pair of old trousers and the only spare coat I have. Also for your head, a plain white turban." "Deeply am I obliged to you, dervish," said the Assistant Collector. "I see you have your ever-blessed ancestor's perspicacity. Did he not sing of the eyes as the mirror of the soul which to the true seer reveals all secrets?" "You know me?" asked the old man amazed. "No," said the Assistant Collector, "but I had heard of Mubarak, who chooses to be known by just that name, lives alone and does much good, advising and teaching. I had little difficulty in knowing you were he, when you stood so impassively sword in hand and spoke so severely and boldly to one much stronger and younger. Now, let me tell you the secret of this uniform and cap I hope you will take charge of until I can arrange to have them returned to their owner. They inspire so tremendous a pride and anger in the wearer, that he cannot bear the least check to his wishes. Even an ordinary question becomes to him a deadly insult. So I sought a change, before I did real damage to some perfectly innocent person." "You have done well, young man," said the dervish. "I'll keep them safe for you, never fear." Dressed in Mubarak's very well-worn baggy trousers and his simple long coat the Assistant Collector bade him a most grateful good-bye. Going into the yard he was about to mount, when

a stern voice called, "Here and Mubarak, holding out a gold piece the Assistant Collector had placed on a corner of the prayer-mat, said, "I take no money from anyone." "Quite right," said the Assistant Collector. "Nor do I from anyone. But am I anyone? Look into my eyes again, dervish, and see for yourself." Twice as long as he had gazed before, the dervish looked, then said, "No, you are not anyone. You are a brother. I serve through prayer and teaching. You serve through deeds. I will take your gold. Farewell oh doer. I hope we meet again before my eyes close for ever." "Far away that day, thinker and helper," said the Assistant Collector. "God willing, I shall be with you again." And he rode out, his head bent in thought.

Going along at an easy pace, his mind full of reflections the dervish's hawk-like eyes had stimulated, the Assistant Collector failed to notice until within a few feet that two very fashionably dressed horsemen had barred his way. As he pulled up, the elder of the two called out. "Fellow, you are riding a horse from my cousin's stable. How came you by it? Answer at once." "I won it in fair fight from a gentleman who looked somewhat like you, so it may have been your cousin, perhaps," said the Assistant Collector. "Move, Sirs, so that I may pass." "You take a high tone but then horse-thieves are apt to do that, aren't they?" said the second rider. "It is absurd to think his cousin would condescend to fight you over a wager, or if he did, you could beat him. Come, accompany us to the police station seven miles away. Your career of crime is ended" "Be sensible," said the Assistant Collector, "I do not wish to have the blood of you two on my head, but if you go on like this, I will have to fight you." "Come, come, fellow, away with this bluster. Hold out your hands to be tied up or my friend here will run you through," said the first rider, while the second drew nearer, sword in hand. With a sudden movement, the Assistant Collector caused the horse to rear so that it almost seemed to stand on its hind legs, its front hoofs in the air, then as the two scattered, came down near the younger rider. Seizing him by his belt, he lifted him up from the saddle and flung him to one side, his sword still waving in his hand. The other rode straight at the Assistant Collector, thrust, missed and recovered, but before he could attack again, the Assistant Collector's axe fell in so might a blow upon his blade that he was left holding only the hilt. "Fools," said the Assistant

Co lector, " you undoubtedly are those who judge a man by his clothes. Now, if you wish to live, go about your business. You have already wearied me sufficiently; should you continue to be tiring, I will make an end of you." So saying he set off at a canter, leaving the two cursing behind him. "*Of course, I can't keep you, old* fellow," he said to the horse, leaning forward to pat its neck. "I won you fairly enough and you've done me proud. But the servant of the laws cannot keep prizes he wins by wagers, and so I'll send you back after a couple of days of rest and good feeding with a letter commending you highly. They'll take good care of you, I've no doubt."

From a grove by the side of the road came the music of a *rebab* played with skill and as the plectrum notes paused, rose a powerful voice in the saint-poet's famous eulogy of beauty, with all its classifications and sub-divisions. The Assistant Collector stopped to listen and as the verse ended, joined in the chorus that dedicates all beauty to God, even the beauty of the vicious and the devilish.

For when is man nearer God
Than in true admiration of Beauty ?

As the chorus ended a big hand emerged from behind a tree and waved to the Assistant Collector and a deep voice said, "Come, share our morning meal, stranger who shared so well our song." Leading his horse, the Assistant Collector entered the grove to find in the grassy open space in its middle a very handsome young man of about twenty-one and a woman somewhat younger, who seemed to have come straight out of the saint-poet's Dream of Beauty. The young man rose and taking the horse led it away to tether it. The girl, who had the rebab in her hand, put it down and went to the side to freshen the fire that was burning there. Soon all three were seated on the mat spread on the grass and the Assistant Collector was being plied with dry soft wheaten cakes, and milk, and fruit.

When the meal was over, and the food removed, the woman looked at her companion, then at the Assistant Collector and cried out, " I must speak. Say I am not wrong in speaking, Sir." " Since I know not what it is you wish to say, I can hardly express an opinion," said the Assistant Collector with a smile. "Well, in your presence I somehow feel more confident, so I will speak. My companion

and I are cousins. He is also, because of the death of his father, my guardian. We are now journeying to my betrothed's home so that I can be married to the man of thirty-five to whom I was promised by his father seven years ago. I have nothing against my betrothed, but I know that my heart is my cousin's and his heart is mine. He is a man of the strictest probity, and has never said a word to me. Though we have been travelling together for four days and sleeping near one another every night, he has not even touched my hand. I am in trust to him; he must discharge his trust whatever it cost him. But I cannot bear it any longer. By God's goodness I swear that if he does not take me in his arms today, I shall kill him as he sleeps tonight and then myself." Flushed with emotion, the unshed tears bright in her eyes, she made an excellent portrait of Determined Love, thought the Assistant Collector, as he turned to the cousin. Blushing to his ear-tips, deeply embarrassed the man said, "It is true that I love her. I think I have done all her life. But my father gave his word. I, his son, could hardly dishonour it. I spoke to my mother. She said, 'Son, if you invite a feud over this, we shall all be wiped out quite easily. He is far stronger. Also he will be in the right. And he is a good man and considerate. He will try to make your cousin comfortable. She will be much better off with him than with you. He has an old kindness for me and he sent me a private message last year, when he asked in public for his betrothed to be sent to him. He said he would not stand in my way if I had other plans for the girl. He knew she was beautiful, but as he had not seen her, her beauty had not affected him. Besides this was a country of beautiful women. In that case he would expect compensation, not very much, just five gold pieces more than his betrothed's age. It might just as well have been five thousand pieces more, for where, son, am I or you and I and our friends going to get twenty-one pieces of gold. We are craftspeople, not land-holders. We live wholly by the work of our hands. Besides I personally am all in favour of the girl getting a chance to escape from our hand-to-mouth life. She really is rather remarkable in character no less than in looks. If you love her, you must want what is best for her. So remain to her the elder brother you have always been, and escort her as soon as possible to her intended, as a good brother should.' Now you know everything, oh stranger to whom my cousin has opened her heart, and so do you, cousin of mine." "Oh my beloved, how you must have suffered! I weep for your long agony even more than I do for my own," cried the girl, the tears rolling

down her cheeks failing to affect her beauty in the least, the Assistant Collector noted admiringly.

Quite a phenomenon, he thought, this sixteen-year-old; was she entitled to her heart's desire or would it be better for her in the end to improve her social and economic position by going on with the arranged marriage? He had not yet come to any conclusion, when both of them turned to him and said, "Tell us what to do. You know the world. You know love. Your eyes are kind, your mind clear, tell us. In the name of God's mercy, we implore you." "Now God guide me right," said the Assistant Collector, "for truly it is a fearful responsibility you put upon me. Is the world ever well lost for love, that is what your choice means, fair maid. Fifteen years hence, when your beauty is no longer fresh—beautiful you will always be, never fear, for your beauty is of the bone not just of the flesh—will you not think with deep regret of the ease and comfort you would have had in your intended's house instead of the endless work in your lover's? Men change, too, you know, and so do women's hearts. On the other hand, love is the true consummation of life, and shall worldly wisdom prevent two of God's finest creations from experiencing all its infinite joys in wedlock? The chances of you two being unhappy if married I do not consider high; you have grown up together, you know one another very well, you have been and are friends, not just lovers. No, on the whole, I'll risk it and wish you joy of one another." "God bless you, oh God bless you," cried the girl, seizing the Assistant Collector's hand and kissing it, while the man looked exalted and inexpressibly happy.

"Come down from your heights, dear children," said the Assistant Collector, "What about the twenty-one gold pieces? Have you thought of them?" They gazed at him dismayed, unable to answer. "Well," said he, "as it happens I am carrying some of my patron's money with me, and I think he would like me to advance it to you, if I could assure him that it had gone to build up a more than usually deserving and good-looking family for the nation. First of all then let us count out the gold." Joining their hands together, he put into them one by one the twenty-one pieces. "Now who will keep these until you transmit them to her ex-intended?" he said. "Why she, of course," said the man, "of anything good that I have ever had she has always been the keeper." "Praise be to God," said the

Assistant Collector to himself. "I have not judged wrong." To them. "Your names and address?" The girl took a scrap of paper out of a bag she was carrying and wrote them out in quite a fair hand. "God be with you. It has been delightful to meet you. Now hasten home and get married. Good fortune attend you always!" said the Assistant Collector. "Oh master of generosity, one boon more," cried the girl. "Marry us here and now. We are three days away from home and now more than ever, it will be difficult to sleep apart. Save me from sin." "I am no priest and who knows a wedding by me would not stand in law. But your point is well-taken," said the Assistant Collector. "The best marriages are of course those made in people's hearts, and since for you that is already complete, I see no harm in giving you, reassurance and freeing you from any apprehension of sin that may affect your lives later. Yes, I shall conduct your marriage, provided as soon as you get home you have it done again forthwith by the proper person." "Agreed, agreed," cried both most enthusiastically.

"Come on then, get that fire going properly, and have you a pomegranate? No, well that apple will do. Give me that and a small knife. Excellent, one with a golden handle too. That should make luck certain. Ha, the fire's made up. Now you (the man) stand on this side of the fire facing the East and you (the girl) on the other facing the West. Come towards one another, now hold hands around the fire and say together, 'You are my true love. Always I promise to live for you and with you.' Now say (the man) 'you are my wife, mistress of my heart and my house.' Now you (the girl) 'you are my husband, master of my heart and my house.' Good. Lean over the fire, each from your side, your hands still joined and kiss. Very good. Next you (the man) cross over to her side, take her arm, and slowly, slowly, both together take the seven measured steps around the fire. Yes, that's good. Revert to your original position, hands still joined, and listen carefully to what I say. 'Almighty God, in thy sight and before thy mighty symbol, fire, this man and woman, freely and of their own choice, have become husband and wife. You made them two, they have made themselves one. Extend to them your grace, Lord of Eternal Beneficence, and make them ever fitter to serve Thee through serving their fellow-creatures. Let them always be a comfort to one another, a joy and a solace. Thy will be done.' My felicitations, madam and sir, you

are now married. Come here together, and wife offer your husband his first comfort Yes, that apple, I half-slice it in four quarters and *in each gap* put half-a-gold piece. There, hold it out to him. Let us see what he does with it. Oh splendid, he has taken out one gold piece and placed it on your right palm, cut a quarter of the apple off and peeled it and is holding it to your lips. Well done. You bite a bit and put the larger part of the piece in his own mouth. Praise be to God. This is surely a match made in Heaven. No, I have no apprehensions for your happiness, children, peace be with you. A perfect place this to begin a honeymoon, so do not hurry away from it too soon." The man having left to fetch the horse, the girl said, "Lord, how can we thank you?" "By being happy, oh beautiful, and trying to make others less fortunate than you happy too," said the Assistant Collector, and then sharply "What *did* you *call* me?" "Why what you are, lord. I recognised you as you were marrying us. A look came into your face as you were making the invocation that I had seen before only on you. So I knew it was you and I felt even happier than before." And as her husband came up with the horse, she took *him by the hand both bowed low*, touching the ground at the Assistant Collector's feet. Placing a hand in blesssing on the back of each, the Assistant Collector said farewell again and leading his horse made his way out of the wood. As he rode down the main road, the thought came to him "a perfect *idyll, that a gem of the purest* lustre from beginning to end. Providence has indeed been bountiful to its servant this day." And he began to hum and soon to sing aloud the saint-poet's panegyric on being alive

'So good it is to live, so good,
That only the recreant would wish to die.
To be fully alive is joy, deep joy.

# XXV

The Assistant Collector's song stopped abruptly as an agonised cry fell on his ears, "Stop, stop please. My father, murdered!" A moment or two later, a boy of about fourteen, strongly built, in deep distress, pushed his way through the bushes by the side of the road and halted, gasping, with the tears running down his cheeks. Twice he tried to speak, but could not. Bending over, the Assistant Collector patted him on the shoulder and said, "Now don't try to tell me. Just jump up behind me and let's get to the site. Guide me." Beyond the bushes, they came upon a narrow track, which led a furlong away to a small house. Following the boy, who had dropped down as they approached it, to the back, the Assistant Collector saw in what was obviously an open bathroom, a corpse lying propped up by the side-wall. A man of about forty, handsome in spite of the grotesqueness of his staring eyes and fallen jaw, a clean stab-wound right through his heart, the front of his body covered with blood, he had clearly been caught quite unprepared. On his hair was still a little of the arecanut's lather with which he had been washing. Probably he had closed his eyes to keep out its smart, and in that moment the unsuspected enemy had struck. So much the Assistant Collector saw while still mounted. Jumping down he made a closer examination. No other wounds. It had happened within the hour, he thought, as he gently closed the open eyelids and, sliding the body down full-length on the floor, cut a portion from his own turban and tied it round the head, bringing the jaw into position and closing the mouth. "Boy," he said and gestured to the feet, and so, the boy taking the feet and the Assistant Collector the shoulders, they carried the body to a small back-verandah and laid it on the blanket he had obviously thrown off as he moved to the bath. "Who?" asked the Assistant Collector. The boy his body quivering with sobs, just looked blank. "Grief is natural, son," said the Assistant Collector, "but grieving won't hang your father's murderers, and that is what we want to do, don't we? So pull yourself together and try

and be helpful. Come on, I'll pour out water for you; clean up your face, get your hair into order and where's your turban, and your axe by your side? What has happened, has happened. What should happen next is in your hands and mine. So now that you're ready, talk coherently and briefly. We must deal with those God-forsaken as soon as possible." The boy nodded, gulped several times, then said, "Sir, I found him as you saw him when I came back from my watch with the sheep, with whom I had been since midnight. He was here when I left. Who did it, I can't say. He had no such deadly enemies that I know of. I can say this though. From the tracks I see, two men were here; one crawled on all fours to the bath."

"You are a puggi, are you?" cried the Assistant Collector. "Come on then, let's waste no time. Here, help me carry your father in to his bed before we leave." This they did, then the boy scouted around for a few minutes and turned to a small elevation behind the house. "This way they came," he said and ran on, the Assistant Collector following on horseback, for he thought if the boy struck a straight trail, they would get quicker to the miscreants that way. With a pause now and again, and some going backward and sideways, the boy led on confidently. Suddenly, he stopped and said, "Now we shall have to enter the independent area, Sir, do we-." "God in Heaven," said the Assistant Collector "Are we after deer or sandgrouse that we should hesitate? We are after murderers and such I would pursue to the ends of the earth if the tracks lay clear. Go on." They went forward a couple of furlongs and the boy said, "They are walking easily, confidently. See here they paused, one sat down, the other went in the direction of those trees. There he comes back, they go on. The marks become clearer, deeper now. They can't be more than a mile or so further up this soft ground." "Come on then," said the Assistant Collector. "Swing yourself up behind me. The quicker we get at them the better." Ten minutes later, they saw two men at a distance.

Hearing the horse's hooves, both stopped and as the Assistant Collector rode up, the younger said, "Where go you travellers? Peace be with you." "No peace to or with you murderers," said the Assistant Collector. "Answer quickly and truly. Why killed you this boy's father? *If you had cause, state it now, ere we take you*

to custody and trial." "Bah, what nonsense are you prating, you loud-mouthed beggar? Change your clothes at least before you utter such fierce threats, oh wearer of graveyard garments riding a stolen horse! This is free land, remember. We answer no questions; we cut off heads, and before that ears and noses too. We kill as we like, and before that shadow travels to that stone, the two of you will be with Eblis." Muttering to the boy, "Off, get your back against that tree, I'll join you there if they unseat me," the Assistant Collector rode forward, as the two with a shout came at him. The younger carried at the ready a long axe with the deadly fan-shaped blade, and the elder twirled his well-balanced iron-ringed **lorh** in preparation for the settling blow. The axe had launched its attacking movement, when the Assistant Collector's horse rose in a levade, letting the stroke pass below it harmlessly and came down heavily, knocking out completely the man with the **lorh**. "Ah, ha," cried the Assistant Collector, on to the ground and in a twinkling of an eyelid with the **lorh** in his hands, "now to your father the Devil, scum." To the rain of blows that followed, the **lorh** offered swift defence, seeming more like a simple light cane as it flashed hither and thither in expert hands. One axe-blow cut through the Assistant Collector's borrowed turban and the end seemed to have come, when the **lorh** with a very late double-handed parry just saved the fight. The axe fell back, the **lorh** advanced. A feint on the left, then on the right, a moment of no defence, and the **lorh**, landed on the murderer's temple with the full power of its wielder's sweep. The fight was over. "Forgive me, God," said the Assistant Collector, breathing heavily, "I wanted to take the man back for trial, not kill him. But the spirit of the fight got into my blood and truly the slightest relaxation might have meant my severed head lying there on the ground instead of his shattered skull." And to the boy, "Is the other fellow dead, too?" "No, Sir," was the answer "he is breathing and none of his bones seem broken." "Well, we have no water here and we can't wait until he chooses to wake. Take a small twig and tickle his nostril with it. Let him regain consciousness with a sneeze." The boy did accordingly and with a most explosive sneeze the man sat up.

Said the Assistant Collector, "If there is any good reason why you should live, tell us. And if there isn't, tell us how you would

like to die. Will you fight? I am at your disposal, or if you are still feeling weak, this boy will oblige. After all, you too are one of his father's murderers." "God pardon you," said the man continuing sitting, "I am not. I don't suppose you'll believe me, but when I accompanied my cousin down to that house, I hadn't the least idea he was contemplating murder. Listen, I'll tell you the whole story. There is a woman who lives four miles from here in a pleasant mansion with a lovely garden. She is a divorcee, very attractive and a most assiduous man-trap. Her husband, finding her demands on him beyond bearing, consented for some time to her taking lovers, so fond he was of her. One, two, three even he put up with. But when she exceeded all bounds and strange men fought over her in his house, he said he would kill her or divorce her as she chose. Weeping most piteously, she chose divorce. Almost at the last moment, he felt he couldn't let her go. She convinced him once again she loved only him. Yet three hours later he found her in bed with another man. There and then he divorced her and naked as she was drove her off his property. Kill her he could not. She moved to this house which a childless uncle had left her and has made of it now a most delicious retreat. She has a good singing voice, has two maids who are excellent musicians, and evening after evening gathers parties of men round her. There is much elegance, often learned discourse, good music and reciting of poetry, and she chooses her companion or rather companions for the night as she pleases. She wants no money and any attempt to offer it means prompt dismissal from her company. Men try to tempt her with strange presents, sometimes she accepts languidly. Generally she looks the offerer straight in the eye and says, 'You are not the present I want today, keep your geegaw.' As the elder of my village, I went to expostulate with her about a young cousin whose wife was weeping out of her eyes because of his absence from her side night after night. She listened to my indignant tirade, cast her eyes down, sighed, said, 'I know, I know, I should not allow any married men into my society, only bachelors and widowers. You are a widower, no?' She looked at me so expressively that I just turned and fled. Before I had got to the gate, her soft arm was round my neck. I had neither mind nor will after that and spent that evening and night in Paradise. In the morning she said, 'Go now and never come back or I shall make you my servant and you will never be able to go.' Low I bowed to her and made my way out of her presence backwards. At

the gate they gave me two beautifully plucked baskets of fruits for the children of my village.

"Now this gay spark of a cousin of mine who lies there so dead used to go there continuously. He was a bachelor, reasonably well off, and who was I, remembering what I did, to tell him to keep away. One day, working in the field near me, he kept on frowning, I asked him what was wrong. Recently he said, the lady had got so occupied with a middle-aged man who always appeared after midnight and left with the dawn that she seemed to want no one else. He had followed him and knew where he lived. He had a plan for spraying on him, at particular spots of his anatomy as he bathed, the bush milk that causes huge boils. That would keep the fellow at home. Would I go with him? A strange jealousy moved me at the thought of this stranger's success with her and I said I would. Standing behind a tree I saw my companion crawl up and then the fall on the man. 'Why did you do that?' I demanded of him when he rejoined me. All he said was, 'It had to be. Now to-night' and we walked on in silence. Believe me, I am telling you the truth." "Have you heard about this woman?" the Assistant Collector asked the boy. "Yes, Sir, his description is not different from what is generally said. But I never knew my father went there. It is of course four years since my mother died and he and I lived alone," said the boy. "It is yours to say what this man's disposal should be," said the Assistant Collector. "His story may or may not be true," said the boy. "There is no proof anyhow. He at the least saw my father being killed by his cousin. Let him take his cousin's axe, Sir. I shall fight him and kill him."

"I doubt that, young man," said the man still seated. "However, I have no desire to kill anyone. I can see how it must look to both of you. The blood guilt is heavy upon me I admit, though I neither took part in your father's murder nor even knew my companion intended it. Look, there is a way out. I shall give compensation. You are too young to be already married, though in a year you well could be? Fourteen aren't you? Good, I have a daughter a year younger than you, without stain or defect, straight in mind and body. To close this business once and for all, I shall give her in marriage to you. What say you, Sir?" and he looked at the Assistant Collector. "Well?" the Assistant Collector said to the

boy. "As you will, Sir, you know best. I place myself in your hands unreservedly," said the youth. "Then," said the Assistant Collector, "I say yes, provided we see her, he approves of her, and she approves of him." "She approve of him, what nonsense is this," said the seated man. "I am her father. I approve that is enough." "Not for us," definitely said the Assistant Collector. "The girl is thirteen. Her heart may already be with another, and I would not have my ward marry a girl whose mind is with someone else when he is holding her." "Let's not argue. I'm tired I admit, come and *see for yourself," said the man getting up at last.* "*What do we* do with ...." and the Assistant Collector gestured towards the body lying there. "I am his only relative," said the man, "so the duty of disposal is mine. There, you see that very deep ravine. We call it the valley of the dead. Many a good fellow has found his resting-place in its depth. So if you will help me, young man, we shall ...." "Will you not say a prayer first?" asked the Assistant Collector. "God", said the man, "is all-seeing, all-just, all-merciful, what need then is there for prayer?" He and the boy picked up the body and started towards the ravine. "Almighty God," said the Assistant Collector, "I who killed this man, pray for him. Deal gently with him, Lord. He was perhaps more a sinner than others, but Beauty was responsible for his downfall. Forgive him, Lord, forgive him." and he remained rapt in concentration until the two returned.

A two-mile walk, the boy leading the Assistant Collector's horse, brought them to the elder's substantial house. Entering, he called for his daughter. In came a very handsome merry-eyed girl. She looked with astonishment at the bare-headed Assistant Collector, whose turban in tatters had been left behind at the scene of the fight, and the youth with him. "Well," said the elder to the Assistant Collector who in turn looked at the youth, who bowed. Turning to the girl, the Assistant Collector said, "Lady, your father desires to give you in marriage to this young man, but before accepting the offer both he and I would like to be sure of your inclination. Should you wish to say no, please do not hesitate to do so." She looked at him for a moment in silence. Then a gleam of mischief came into her eyes and she said, "Sir, curly-locks, were you making the offer for yourself, I would reply, but since you are not, I see no reason to." "Nonsense, girl, nonsense," said the elder, "you will do what I say.

It is very necessary." Saying nothing, the girl just shrugged her shoulders. At this, the youth stepped forward and making a deep bow, said, "Excellent and beauteous lady, it is my honour and privilege humbly to urge you to be my wife." Gravely she answered, "Valiant Sir, it is my honour and privilege proudly to accept your offer." Both stood smiling at one another for a moment, then burst out laughing and clasped hands. "She and I played together as children, Sir," explained the boy, "and this was part of our game." "Yes," said the girl, "you see until I was seven mother used to go to stay with her sister, near his place, and she always took me, so my cousins and I and he and several other children were often together." "Very interesting," said the elder, "but bring the milk and let the betrothal take place."

The girl went into another room and returned with milk in a silver bowl. The elder took a sip, then held it out to the Assistant Collector. He in turn sipped, and said, "Now you two come forward. Put your lips together to the bowl and drink." Both did. "Now, some food," said the elder. "We have other duties to perform, Sir, sadder ones, alas, as you know, and so must hurry away." said the Assistant Collector. "Yes, yes," said the elder, "I almost forgot. But one thing, when do you want the marriage?" "What say you children?" asked the Assistant Collector. "May we consult, Sir?" said the girl, and at a nod, the two went on to the verandah. "Absurd, asking them," commented the elder, "you will forgive me for saying so, but you have some remarkably old notions. "Ah, yes," said the Assistant Collector, "I admit it, so I have; but since I have, be good enough to humour me." The couple came in, and the boy said, "Sir, in sixteen months from today, if you approve." "Certainly," said the Assistant Collector, "and now farewell. This young lady is going to be a true beauty by then, so remember, Sir, a promise is a promise, a betrothal a betrothal, no amount of gold can wash either away." The elder looked stern, then relaxed and said mildly, "No reminder is necessary. Go in peace." The girl moved forward and touching the ground at the Assistant Collector's feet, said, "Your blessings, lord." Placing his hand on her back in blessing, the Assistant Collector asked, "You know me?" "I guessed," was the answer. "The bards have not stressed your curls for nothing. And who else would ask for the woman's agreement?" "I am afraid you are a minx, child. Well, God be with you and learn all you can in these sixteen

*months," said the Assistant Collector, as they departed. "I am* truly thankful to you, lord," said the youth from behind him on the horse. "You have done justice on my father's murderer. You have given me the bride I always wanted." "The good God did both, *son, not I; give* praise where it is due," said the Assistant Collector.

Arriving at the cottage, they found a transformation. A regally beautiful lady, dressed completely in black, had taken over, and two maids, *also from head to foot in black, were carrying out her directions.* The murdered man's body had been bathed, clothed and now lay ready for internment. "His son," said the lady. "I am almost as sorry for you as for myself. And you, Sir?" "A friend," said the Assistant Collector. "Who has been in a fight," said the lady. "Has he been avenged?" "Justice has been done," said the Assistant Collector. "Good, I breathe more easily. You can scarcely attend the funeral bare-headed. Sit down, I shall tie you a turban," and she swathed a length of delicate black round his head into an outstanding pattern. "Where do you lay him to rest?" she asked the son. "There was spot at the edge of the second field under those trees, where he often used to sit. There I think," he said. "Ah, yes, he told me of it, and of the birds that gathered when he spread the crumbs from his lunch there. *Almost he made it sound like* poetry," she said with a sigh. "Well, let us go." "You will accompany us?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Yes, why not? What better way to say farewell? His son, his friend, his beloved, *a noble funeral, nothing lacking in his leave-taking.*" The Assistant Collector, the son and the two maids took the bier on their shoulders, the lady walking behind intoning prayers in a most poignant voice. Half-way to the burial-spot, she took the Assistant Collector's place and he walked behind. Arriving at the spot, the boy assisted by the maids dug the grave, while the others stood absorbing the peace of the place. When all was ready, the boy and the Assistant Collector lowered the body gently to the bottom. The Assistant Collector handed a spade filled with earth to the lady. She looked at the son, who nodded. Slowly she emptied it into the grave saying, "Farewell, master of my heart, farewell, lover found so late, lost so soon, farewell." All present in turn put in a spadeful, then the son and the maids filled up the grave. When the surface had been made smooth, standing at the head of the grave, the lady sang *the saint-*

poet's famous elegy on his wife's death. Tears poured down her cheeks as she sang, but the strength and quality of her voice were not affected. The son, the maids, cried unabashedly and a suspicious witness appeared even in the Assistant Collector's eyes as the noble message ended. Truly a royal ending, he thought, this man whom I knew not, whose son in this strange manner has become my ward, must have deserved well of God. Peace be with him!

Making their way back to the cottage, the lady walked beside him. Suddenly she said, "Tell me all, lord," and as he looked startled. "Yes, I knew you the minute you came into the room. That hair full of curls, that high forehead, those piercing, fierce eyes, that air of detachment, all these that the bards have bruited abroad, in whom else could they combine? So tell me, lord, not now, but after breakfast." "I have to hurry, lady, I must be back today, so will you forgive me for leaving immediately. The young man will tell you all," said the Assistant Collector. "No, I will not permit you to leave, not so much in mine as in the people's interest. Have you not heard that it is worst of luck to leave a funeral without partaking of the meal that follows? You will stay, and that's all there is to it unless you would fight my maids and me," she said with great dignity. "Most queenly," said the Assistant Collector bowing, "to hear is to obey." So after a meal of cold viands and hot milk strengthened, with a rare cordial, he sat by her side and told her the whole tale, while the maids and the son cleared up and set the house to rights. Ending he paused. "Well done," she said, "very well done. The bards do not exaggerate. So now au revoir. You will come and see me?" "No, I will not," said the Assistant Collector, "for in my heart is not strength enough to hold out against such charm, grace, and loveliness." "Would there be much harm in succumbing, then, warrior?" she asked smiling. "Indubitably, jewel of wisdom, as you know very well. Worthy or not, I set an example; I am fated to be the salt, and if the salt itself lose its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?" "You are right," she said. "And if I come to see you?" "You will be welcome, lady, we shall talk in the presence of Rais Mohamed Khan, the Naik, and Dhanji, the butler, shall serve you tea or coffee." "No," she said musingly, "No, I shall not trouble you. Farewell then, oh passer-by in life's journey, good luck go with you." "And with you Peace if you permit, one boon I would ask. As you are powerful, be merciful,"

said the Assistant Collector and he looked towards the boy who had just come into the room. "What, that child! Truly you presume too much," she said, and then, "no, you are right. I know not what I may not be capable of. Well, you have my promise. We shall leave immediately after you and I shall not see him again, Enough?" "Many, many thanks, most gracious," said the Assistant Collector and kissing the hand she extended to him, turned to the boy to tell him how he could contact him if need arose and to say that he would expect a quarterly report from him about all his doings. "For if I am your de facto guardian, I am that, remember." "Your most dutiful ward, lord," said the boy. "Yes, all your instructions of course I shall obey." And with that, vaulting into the saddle, the Assistant Collector rode away, stopping for a moment to take a last look at the beauty and the boy both of whom waved to him.

Uneventful thereafter was his journey to the nearby ferry. On the bank a boy of about nine greeting him, said, "Tell me, wise traveller, what is that which is very fine on top and at bottom and very ordinary in between?" "I am in no mood for riddles, young man," said the Assistant Collector, "in any case I give up." "Will you give me an anna for sugar-plums if I tell you?" asked the urchin. "Yes, I suppose so," said the Assistant Collector. Moving into the shelter of a tree, up the branches of which he could easily swarm, the boy said, "Why you, of course, your turban and horse are magnificent, your dress insignificant." "Yes," said the Assistant Collector, "I am rather a poor fish, I agree. Here, take your reward." The boy came forward to have put into his hand not the anna he expected but a quarter gold-piece. Bending down, the Assistant Collector gripped his right ear and said, "This is for making fun of strangers, and that is for taking a message to the old gentleman who lives three miles away. Tell him the man to whom he had entrusted his son's affair desired you to tell him his son would be released from the lock-up today, it having been proved he is innocent. Got that? Repeat. Now run and deliver that message. But before you go, tell me do you know what you've got in your hand?" "Yes, Sir, thank you very much. It's a quarter gold-piece," said the boy smiling. "And what do you propose to do with it?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Why, Sir, I'll leave it with my mother. She'll get me what I really need with it," said the boy. "Good lad," said the Assistant Collector, "here's two annas for

sugar-plums. Good luck." The boy fell back two paces, saluted in the best soldier fashion, then turned on his heels and was off in a flash. The Assistant Collector dismounting led his horse to the ferry that had come in meanwhile and paid his dues for man and horse to the ferryman, who looked at him with a puzzled expression, frowned, and looked again, only to shake his head and turn to someone else, who was trying to get on a double load without paying for it.

## XXVI

The ferry reaching the other bank, the Assistant Collector led his horse on to the land. Mounting, he called to the ferryman, "Farewell, oh master of the river. May all your crossings be favourable" and trotted on. A sense of home-coming brought a lump into his throat as he sighted his camp in the distance and automatically he began to canter. As he rode to the entrance of the main tent, halted and jumped down, Anwar Khan stepped forth from the front verandah of the tent and took the reins saying, "Very welcome indeed are you, Sir. I was just beginning to be anxious." Suddenly he stopped, his eyes on the Assistant Collector's turban. "Ah, ha," said the Assistant Collector, "saw you ever a finer shape?" "Nor a finer cloth to be sure," said Anwar. "If I may ask, your honour did not tie it on yourself?" "You may ask," said the Assistant Collector. "The answer is no, and that is all the answer you will get. Now what news of the Khanum? Is the Naik back? Where is Dhanji?" "The answer to all your questions is no news, Sir. If you will enter," said Anwar Khan, raising the outer chik, "I will be back in a while after looking to this noble steed." Going into his office-cum-living-room, the Assistant Collector unwound his turban and put the cloth on a side-table. Sitting down in his office chair he looked through the heap of neatly-arranged post that had come in

during his absence and picked out a demi-official cover with an 'Immediate' slip upon it. Opening it he read, 'What the devil are you up to, young fellow, that your old sheristedar demands, yes, by God, demands in your name that I move forthwith a detachment with light guns 15 miles to intercept an attack from Red-Beard if it comes, and otherwise to let him see we're there and so keep him quiet! Who the devil do you think you are to make demands on no less a person than the Colonel of this regiment? They haven't suddenly gone out of their minds and made you O.C. Brigade, have they? Am strongly inclined to ride over myself, take you on with the sticks and give you such a drubbing that you won't be able to move a limb for three days. However, my men are on their way as desired. So is a report to H.Q. and I pity you when the Chief and the Commissioner together have you on the mat.' The signature was like a large butterfly in flight, and there was a postscript that read: 'A brace of imperial sandgrouse, a hare, half-a-dozen quail accompany. Enjoy them while you may, for soon will come the reckoning for you.' The Assistant Collector chuckled. He had met this distinguished soldier, a veteran of many battles, only twice, but he had liked him and clearly the liking was reciprocated. Yes, it had been cheek, asking Pribhdas to write like that. But what else could he do? He couldn't drop the business he had in hand. Anyhow, when the time for explanations came, he would put everything in due order in his own mind. That would be another day.

A moment later Pribhdas himself entered to be greeted with a hearty, "Well, you shook the Colonel Sahib up all right, Pribhdasji. Here is his loving letter. What exactly did you say?" "Why, Sir, that you wanted him to prevent an enemy from destroying the greatest poet of our time, that immediate action was essential and his men and guns must get to the spot forthwith. I told him you were engaged on a life and death matter, but had sent me special instructions to urge him to act at once. I was overcome by the thought of danger to the poet, great blessing as he is to all men of understanding and taste, and so may have omitted some of the customary compliments; yes, I confess the message was probably somewhat curt, Sir. I hope he is not too angry," said Pribhdas. "I don't think he is angry at all," said the Assistant Collector, "but he has of course to report to his superiors in a matter like this and they may well take an unfavourable view of this kind of

behaviour in a junior. No doubt we shall get a D.O. demanding explanation soon. But don't let's bother about that till it happens. How have things been here?" "Very quiet, Sir, in your absence, so that we in the camp office have been able to work quite undisturbed. You will be pleased to learn the Head Munshi has got every single matter ready for orders, and that is the case with my branch too. If you can spare a morning for him and an afternoon for me, the only papers that will remain pending will be those that may need decision in the post on your table." "Very satisfactory, but haven't you had any word from the Naik? That's what is really important just now," said the Assistant Collector. "Nothing, Sir," answered Pribhdas, "which probably means the noble Khanum is still engaged in negotiations. Nothing untoward can have happened. You remember the saint-poet's words about the sending of missions—confidence in the emissary, patience in oneself." "H'm, you're right," said the Assistant Collector, "but in this particular instance the stakes are very high. Ah, well, God alone is all-knowing. Many petitioners yesterday?" "About a score, Sir, and they were very sceptical when I told them you had gone off on special personal business. 'Come, come, Diwan,' said one, 'is the lord likely to give preference to private business over public duty? We know better. God forbid, he is not ill, is he? Tell us the truth.' All I could say was they were at liberty to look all over the camp, including in your own tent, and satisfy themselves you were not here. 'Well,' said the seniormost, 'we'll wait till tomorrow; if he is not here then, woe betide you that are!' Why, they're gathering already, they've heard you're back obviously." "A bath and change first, and then let's begin. Mustn't keep them waiting longer than is absolutely necessary. Thanks be to Providence, hunger has already been amply satisfied since the morning. In a short while, Pribhdasji."

Half an hour later, refreshed and in his usual garb, the Assistant Collector took his stand at the tent-door and greeted the hundred and fifty or so in front of the tent with the usual "Peace be with you." All replied, then a patriarch stepped forward and said, "You were not here yesterday, lord?" The Assistant Collector nodded assent. "Nor the day before, lord?" Again the nod. "But many of us were, and all because of you. Your camp was announced for these days and you were not here to listen and direct. That was not proper, was it? Do you agree and will you explain or shall I go away and never come

near you again ?" A murmur arose from the crowd, voices were raised in dissent, some cried, "Pay no heed to him, lord," others shouted, "Sit down, old man." The Assistant Collector held up his hand, and when everybody had fallen silent, said, "You are perfectly right, the camp was fixed, I should have been here. I apologise to all those who were inconvenienced by my absence. Please accept my regrets and in token of your forgiveness partake of the simple bread and tea Anwar Khan here will shortly be bringing round." Anwar looked despairingly at the heavens and slipped away to the back to set the big cauldron boiling. "The reason for my absence too, undoubtedly you have a right to learn. It was this. An old father came to me and asked for his son's life, if he was innocent of a murder for which he had been arrested, and on the available evidence, seemed likely to be hanged. A simple man, a good-hearted man, an unworldly man, the father was. Many of his long line, he said, had killed in fair fight, none had ever murdered. He was sure his son was innocent, but all he wanted was for me to find out the truth whatever it was. I could not meet his eyes and say no, so I said yes. It was in another jurisdiction, so I took three days' leave on personal business. The son was innocent, the killers are dead and by now the son must be with his father. That was all the reason." A hush followed for quite a minute. Then the impressive old questioner took his turban from his head and bent forward to lay it at the Assistant Collector's feet in token of repentance. Taking him by the arm before he could do so, the Assistant Collector raised him up and gently put the turban back on his head saying, "No, Sir, no, this is not fitting. You must have grandsons older than me." Trembling a little, the patriarch spoke, "Who am I, unworthy, selfish, self-centred, who are we, with our base motives and self-interested notions, to question you, oh true dervish ? Fortunate indeed are we to have you for our hakim, lord ! Forgive me, forgive us." "No question of forgiveness arises here," said the Assistant Collector, "it is very proper that he who is set in authority over the people should be questioned by those for whose benefit he has been set in authority. I am the servant of the laws. You are the reason for the laws. Who has a better right then than you, the people, to question their servant ? And so to business. Your plaint, Sir ?" "I have none," said the old man. 'I came but to see and listen, and am sorry I have wasted so much of your time." The Assistant Collector bowed and smiled.

Followed two and a half hours of listening, questioning, deciding. All had made their plaints and the Assistant Collector was about to turn into the tent, when a little girl stood in front of him and announced in a clear firm voice, "Lord, I am seven and I have come to serve you." "My privilege, young lady," was the reply, "but will not your parents be broken-hearted at your leaving them?" Said the girl, shaking her curl-covered head, "My mother died when I was three, my father six months ago. Already my step-mother with whom I live is planning to marry another, a man my father disliked and I hate. In any case my step-mother does not like me and is often cruel to me. So when I heard you were only two miles away, I thought I'd come to you. I can be very useful, lord, I can sew and cook and keep a house clean. My father taught me to read a little. He thought very highly of you. So, I may stay, mayn't I?" "You go a little too fast, dear child," said the Assistant Collector, and turning to the spectators, "Does any one know about this matter?" "I come from near her house," said a middle-aged woman. "What she says is true. Her step-mother isn't in the least concerned about her." "Well, tomorrow we shall hear your step-mother. Meanwhile, would you not like to go back for the night at least?" said the Assistant Collector. The little girl standing there, shaking her head, trying not to burst into tears, looked so frustrated that Pribhdas' tender heart quite melted. He said, "If you permit, Sir, I shall look after the child until tomorrow. I have a grand-daughter just her age." "Ah yes, Premi. What is your name, my dear?" the Assistant Collector asked. "My father called me Pyari Banoo," said the child with a shy smile. "Good, then, Pyari, the grandfather of Premi, the same name really, will look after you until we've heard your step-mother tomorrow. That is unless you have any objection." "No, lord, I am sure I shall be happy there. He is the famous Sufi, is he not? And loves music. I too can sing," and in a fresh, pure voice the child began the saint-poet's 'Invocation to Evening'. Silently, the company listened until the truly-rendered last high note. Then they burst into applause, "You have a great gift there, child," said the Assistant Collector. "May the Master of all harmony make it a true blessing to you." And he turned into the tent as Pribhdas led the little girl away and the crowd dispersed.

An interval of relaxation in his long chair, a long drink slowly sipped, and the Assistant Collector sat down to deal with the waiting

envelopes on his table. He had got to about the end when word was brought in that Alfresun Khan sought audience. "Let him come in," said the Assistant Collector and a moment later was greeting the broad-shouldered, open-faced chief. "On getting off at the station, I heard that Zubeida Khanum with, in her train, the Naik and your honour's butler, was visiting Roumela's parents. So I rode over straight here. It is true, isn't it, lord? You persuaded my great-aunt to make the offer. Oh I am very, very grateful," said he. "Hey, stop being joyous, friend. They are there, yes, have been there for nearly five days by now, but what's been accomplished, if anything at all, we don't know here. So resourceful a man as the Naik would somehow have managed to let me know had there been anything settled. I suppose it's hopeful, they are still guests and there's been no bloodshed, but beyond that I don't think we'd better go at present," said the Assistant Collector. "How did your mission to the capital go?" "The great Khanum will get her way, she can't be defeated, so I'll continue to be hopeful, Sir," said Alfresun. "As to my visit it was most successful. I was given two thousand five hundred for the manuscript and asked to convey messages of the utmost consideration and esteem to you and the Sheristedar Sahib by the learned T. Here is the letter for you, and for Pribhdasji there is also this box." "Good," said the Assistant Collector. "With two thousand five hundred you ought to be able to make a very good job of that field. Don't tell me, for God's sake, you've spent it on something else." "No, lord, no, how could I when I had promised you, though I must confess I was surely tempted to buy some presents for the lady Roumela." "No better present for any woman than a solvent husband standing on his own feet, remember that," said the Assistant Collector. "Now this letter from T. we won't open till Pribhdasji is available, which won't be for another half-hour at least. Meanwhile tell me in detail what happened when you met T." "He was pleased with the letter from you, admired the calligraphy, wanted a full account of who had written it. When I had told him all I could, he started studying the manuscript, examined it in various ways, finally said it was undoubtedly genuine, though he wouldn't put a date on it forthwith, and he could assure me of the most grateful thanks of the Ancient Society if I presented it to their collection, where it would have a most honoured place. I said I could not thank him sufficiently for his kind words, but I would never dare to face you if I did not return with a good sum in exchange for the manuscript.

'This Assistant Collector of yours is rather a miserly fellow, isn't he?' he said. 'Doesn't he think at all of the glory you and your family would win by donating it?' I said there was no man more careful of other people's money or goods than your Honour, no man more lavish with his own. That stopped him. He looked at the manuscript again, sighed, said he would have to put it to his committee, I wasn't to build up any high hopes, a few hundred perhaps, he would let me know in two or three days. I told him your Honour's instructions were to consider nothing less than a very respectable amount and you had also said something about foreign experts shortly to visit you. He got red in the face and jumped up with what was obviously a great oath in some language I did not understand, then controlled himself, smiled, took my address and told me I would hear from him in two days. With many thanks I bowed myself out, carefully carrying the manuscript with me.

"Early next morning, feeling very restless, I hired a horse from a stable nearby and was directed to the polo ground, where they said one could ride without interruption at that hour. My steed, though not even in the 'very good' class, was stout-hearted, and after I had tried his paces and taken him over a few jumps, I got that feeling of unison with the horse which is one of the greatest joys of riding for pleasure. We went cantering along easily, both of us enjoying ourselves, when suddenly I found a soldierly figure, very straight-backed, around fifty from the grizzled hair on his bare head, keeping pace with us on a first-rate charger. We completed a round without saying a word. Then he asked 'Gallop?' and set off. I caught up with him and we went neck and neck, until seeing my horse was getting distressed, I said, 'Enough for me' and slowed down. He too reined in and we trotted along companionably. 'I am glad to see you consider your steed, Sir,' he said, 'so many people don't nowadays. You are from the North?' I said I was and found myself telling him under his gentle questioning about why I was there and about how you had said I wasn't to donate the MSS, and must get a good price, and use the money on the 16-acre field. 'Very prudent, your friend. Who is he? Perhaps I know him,' he said. 'Friend,' I exclaimed, 'well of course he is, none better, but I had never thought of him in that way. To us he is the lord.' 'The lord,' he said puzzled. 'Do you mean you believe the man has divine attributes?' 'No, no,' I said, 'he is our hakim. We call him lord.' 'God in

Heaven,' he said, 'you mean the Assistant Collector. Your honoured appellation, Sir?' 'Alfresun,' I said. 'Ah, of course,' he said. 'You are history and I know now exactly where you come from. And your Assistant Collector, you and the other very proud people there call lord. Rather unusual, isn't it?' 'Not at all, Sir, if you know him or hear of his deed. The bards have many a song about him.' '*I see, I see,*' he said thoughtfully. As we rode on a uniformed sowar, carrying a lance with a special pennant at the tip, came up to him and said, 'Time to be back, Sir. The lady sahib told me to remind you there are guests *for breakfast at 8-30.*' '*Ah, yes,*' *he said.* 'Now *friend* Alfresun, we must meet again and talk. Will you have tea with us at 4-30 this afternoon? Our friend here will meet you at the outer gate and bring you to the house. Good God, you don't know which *house, do you?* My name is M. and I happen to be the Commissioner.'' He extended his hand, I shook it and said, 'Thank you very much. I'll be there.' With a smile he rode off, the sowar behind him.

"That evening at *4.25 I was at the gate, and was conducted* through two beautiful gardens to an inner courtyard lined with flower-beds where on a lawn sat in a cane-chair a good-looking middle-aged lady who must have been very beautiful in her youth. She bade me *welcome and extended* her hand. I took it and bowing, kissed it. 'Well done,' she said, 'who taught you that?' 'My great-aunt,' I answered, and on further questioning mentioned the name of Zubeida Khanum and her protege Marie Louise. As we were talking, the Commissioner came up, accompanied by a younger man, who wore a glass in his right eye and was, I was told, the Assistant Commissioner. Tea and delicate sandwiches and cream and walnut cakes I was plied with and we sat and talked of the shikar in the hills and he told me of how his father, a General, had once been taken prisoner by a connection of mine on the other side of the Border, and having learned our language there, had taught it to all his four children and of how his wife had picked it up from him. And then he said, 'I was looking at the crime statistics of the northern districts today and there has been a quite remarkable fall in serious crime in your sub-division over the last three quarters. Murders, dacoities, robberies, all down to less than half the average. Do you think that's correct?' 'Yes, Sir, people don't kill as they used to. It's become quite usual *for people when a quarrel has got to the axe stage to*

call on the contenders to stop and take the point to the lord to decide. And it's quite easy to take it to him too. Every afternoon he holds open **kacheri** at the tent door in the presence of hundreds. Any one can get up and state his grievance and find remedy. And if it's an expert matter and he himself thinks he doesn't know enough, next day or next week depending on where his camp is going to be, he gets the experts, assesses their opinions and decides. If two people proud about the quality of their horses or wool or wheat or grapes contend theirs is the better, it is not necessary to kill to prove it is. They appear together before him, state their cases, get a decision. If a husband has been deprived of his wife's company by another or a wife wants to leave her husband because he has married another, he will listen to the aggrieved party, in private if necessary, and bring about a settlement without bloodshed. He won't let bloodfeuds start if he gets to know in time. That's why he's pushed me out here just now really !' And you'll forgive me, Sir, I couldn't help it, in that friendly atmosphere I told the whole story about Roumela and myself and how you had made us both behave ourselves.

"As I described the situation when I left, the Commissioner looked quite grave, and the lady said to me almost in a whisper. 'Do you think he will be able to make the offer on your behalf?' 'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm sure he'll do his best, and that up to now has never failed.' 'Well,' said the Commissioner, 'you've promised to take no fatal step, that's a blessing.' 'This young officer,' said the Assistant Commissioner, 'takes far too much on himself.' The husband and wife smiled at one another, as if to say he doesn't understand. Then she asked her husband, 'What is the blood?' 'Why, the best in the world, I do believe,' he said. 'Courage, responsibility, understanding, integrity, justice, authority, in every single tiny drop. He's missed his century, that boy. A hundred years ago, he'd have welded the whole north into one kingdom and ruled it very well. I don't think he'll let the whole place go up in smoke. Heavens, we forgot we were speaking in front of an admirer. Well now it's done. You can tell your Hakim what I said, young man, if you want to. You can also tell him that if the place does go up in smoke and he's still alive at the end of it—very probably he won't be, because he'll be wherever it's most deadly—I'll turn him into an Assistant Judge trying petty civil suits in some miserable place on the east side where the mosquitoes are as big as snails.' 'Oughtn't we to get urgently in

touch with the Collector, Sir, and warn the Army too?' said the Assistant Commissioner in English, not knowing I could understand, *though not speak it.* The Commissioner just looked into the distance, but the lady said, in English too, 'You really shock me. This young man has been talking to us frankly, as a friend, without the least reservation, and you want to use the knowledge we've so got to rouse prejudice and suspicion against the man he rightly admires so much. To say nothing of the fact that undue publicity at this time might very well bring about the very catastrophe the A.C. is doing *his best to prevent.' 'I think so too,' said the Commissioner. The* shadows were beginning to lengthen and I got up to go. The Commissioner shook hands and said, 'The best of luck. Peace be with you in your marrying and your living.' The lady who had left the room for a moment came back with a packet wrapped in paper and said. 'Give it to the lord from me and tell him I'll look forward to seeing him on his next visit here. I'm sure everything will go well for true love and I shall meet Roumela and you together soon.' Instead of shaking hands, I bent down and touched the ground as we do to an elder. Her husband took her hand and placed it, covered with his own, on my back in blessing. The Assistant Commissioner saw me to the high dogcart that had been got ready to take me to my residence, and shook hands heartily. So much cordiality was shown to me because of you, lord."

"Because of yourself, Alfresun Khan, make no mistake. I've had little to do with either husband or wife, but I know he is a very shrewd judge of men, and she comes from a long line of honestly-killing forbears. Quality such people recognise instantly and appreciate. I felt somewhat apprehensive when you said you had told them about this particular business but it may well turn out to have been for the best. Right at the top is known now what's going forward, and I'm being left with a free hand. I think the Sheristedar Sahib will be free by now." And raising his voice he asked the Naik's second assistant, who was at the door, to ask the Sheristedar to be so good as to come over when he conveniently could.

Pribhdas, having greeted Alfresun, was given the letter. He opened it and read aloud. A para stressed the Assistant Collector's *perspicacity in sending the MSS to so fitting an agency. Three* more dealt with calligraphy, touched on its finer points, critically appreciated Pribhdas' own handiwork. That the great T. had been rendered happy by the manuscript was very clear when Pribhdas opened the box

sent for him and found in it a beautifully-worked set of ink-pots for inks of different colours, a special penknife for mending quill and reed pens, and two famous poems of the saint-poet, finely hand-written, on the pleasure the calligraphist found in his work and gained by it. "Congratulations," said the Assistant Collector, "appreciation by the best in your own field, not much can be better than that. Long may you use this set and much joy you may find in its use." Happy, the man left. Said Alfresun, "I think I'll go home now, Sir. There'll be much to attend to after this absence." "Certainly," said the Assistant Collector, "who knows there may even be a message or two waiting for you in some secret spot; if it is good news, don't hesitate to disturb me with a note." Blushing, Alfresun left the tent, to enter a moment later with the packet that had been given to him by the Commissioner's lady. "I almost forgot," he said and bowing low, departed. Row upon row of liqueur chocolates delighted the Assistant Collector's eyes when he opened the box. Carefully sampling a kirsch, he thought very kindly of this very unexpected donor and sat revolving in his mind methods of not letting the whole place go up in smoke, even if the Khanum's mission failed and the lovers eloped, as he felt sure they would in the last resort. To be prepared for every contingency, and then to deal successfully with anyone that could not have been prepared for, that was true planning, effective implementation, it occurred to him. The whole art of government, what did it come to finally? The management of men for their betterment in every way. No good making people just rich if they remained in their thinking and behaviour brutal, vulgar oafs. The sense of beauty, the inner dignity, even the simplest shepherd boy here had, could anything compensate for its destruction? The quality of life, the intangible appreciable that made all the difference, could that be imparted? And so, in a pensive mood to dinner under his own roof, insubstantial though it was, after some days of wandering. Praise be to God in the highest, he reflected, how much had he not been permitted to pack into these three days. Extremes of ugliness and beauty there had been, some idyllic episodes, too. And his thought turned to the little girl in Pribhdas' charge, so small, so self-assured, so accomplished, so vulnerable. Compassion, yes that was it, one felt a deep compassion for all human beings including oneself. So well almost all of them meant, so ill most of them did. Alas, yes, alas. Well, after dinner he would listen to the Trout Quintet. Tomorrow was also a day.

## XXVII

During inspection next morning the Assistant Collector made his way towards the little girl's house. Dismounting a little away from the small courtyard in front of it, he walked to its gate and called out, "Peace be with the inmates of this house. Would one of them be so good as to come and talk to me?" A tall well-built woman in her late twenties appeared at the house door and said, "This is my house. I am a widow with much to do and I have no time for idle chatter. What is it you want?" "You have a small daughter?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, but I have a step-daughter," the woman said coldly. "Where is she now?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Heaven knows," answered the woman, "must be wandering about somewhere, as she always does. A more wilful creature there never was." "Was she at home last night?" was the next question. "I suppose so, I don't know. But what is all this fuss about? Has she got drowned or killed someone or something? That girl has always been much more trouble than she is worth, as I told her father many a time, but he would never let me discipline her. And since his death she has developed such a fierce spirit that I've just left her alone. She can use a knife quite shrewdly, you know," answered the woman. "You wouldn't mind her leaving you then?" said the Assistant Collector. "Mind? Am I demented? I'll be delighted. But who are you and what has all this got to do with you ?" demanded the woman. "I am the servant of the laws within whose jurisdiction you live, oh hard-hearted woman," said the Assistant Collector. "At the request of the child whom you, her natural guardian, should have cherished and instead have neglected vilely, I propose to make arrangements for her to live away from you." "Thanks be to God; when you know her better, perhaps you will not think so badly of me. The arrogance of that little—no, I won't use the word,

has nearly driven me crazy sometimes," said the woman. "What about her share of her father's estate?" asked the Assistant Collector. "What estate? This wretched little house even is rented. He was skilful with his hands and admittedly we lived well, but he left nothing save a pair of silver-handled daggers and a rather curious shell-box which I've never been able to open, a kind of toy. She can have the lot, I don't mind." At a sign from the Assistant Collector, the village-officers who had accompanied him and had stopped where he had dismounted came up. The local man confirmed her statement about the lack of land or other property of her former husband. The woman then went into the house and, bringing out a bundle containing some clothes, two daggers and a shell-box, handed them over to the village-officer saying, "There you are, I want no part or parcel of that child. Only let her leave me in peace." "God have mercy upon you, woman," said the Assistant Collector turning away.

All that day a slight melancholy remained with the Assistant Collector as he dealt with its duties, the cases, papers, petitioners, nor was it relieved when late in the evening as he relaxed for the first time that day, the Naik entered and saluted. "Well?" said the Assistant Collector. "Not so well Sir, yet not ill too," said the Naik. "The noble Khanum instructed me, 'Tell my co-sponsor it still hangs in the balance. Around tomorrow the decision should come.' And she sent me to explain the whole position and acquaint you with her ideas about future action in case of need. For she said, 'He must be warned and I cannot keep you from your duties any longer, you must be badly needed. Dhanji I will keep, both as a symbol and because of his wonderful impassiveness that impresses so much our more volatile natures. He receives the most extraordinary statements or offers without the twitch of a muscle and a simple : As it pleases your Honour or Ladyship. At the same time his capacity for accurate observation and being part of the landscape at the right moment brings me in much valuable inside information. Give the lord an account of the happenings here since we came and tell him I shall be with him as soon as I can once the matter is settled.' But you look rather weary, Sir. Perhaps after dinner will be best?" "Yes, I think so, Mohamed Khan, a slight heaviness of the spirit has been with me all day and I'll no doubt be better able to give full heed

to your account after a quarter of hour's music following bath and dinner. You remember the saint-poet's

delight and joy to the contemplative,
serenity and peace to the sad,
zest and vigour to the active,
that is music
that is song."

Singing the lines the Assistant Collector smiled, "Why I'm feeling more cheerful already. Yes, Mohamed Khan, let it be after dinner and mine. You know, I didn't realise it quite until I saw you but I missed you badly. Very glad I am you're back." Mohamed Khan smiled, bowed and went out.

Refreshed physically by a hot bath and a sound though unimaginative dinner, and mentally by the sonata he had listened to, the Assistant Collector was lying back in his long chair, having finished at leisure his coffee and cherry brandy, when the Naik entered. "Sit down, Mohamed Khan and begin," he said. "On the morning after Dhanji and I reached the Khanum's mansion, an impressive cavalcade it was that started out at about ten. Nineteen I counted besides us two; an auspicious number I said to the Khanum as we rode out of the gate. 'Bah,' she said, 'I have won too many battles on days astrologers assured me would end disastrously for me to worry about such nonsense. You don't seriously believe in lucky numbers and horoscopes and sand-reading and palmistry and all that, do you? Luck, yes, there is luck, it sometimes comes to your aid when you are at your lowest and sometimes deserts you when everything is going well with you. But it comes and goes like the wind. You can't induce it to stay by wearing jewels and following numbers and observing dates and consulting people who with their mysteries and hocus-pocus, their zodiacs and palm-pictures, live exceedingly well at the cost of the credulous. For superstition of every kind both my husband and I always had the greatest contempt and when we governed we made every effort to wean the people away from such practices. Once when I was spending a week at his headquarters, the most celebrated astrologer of the whole kingdom came to the darbar one day. Taking his place among the petitioners, when his turn came he raised his impressive voice and said, 'Governor, you who dispraise

our gift of foreknowledge that comes from the Almighty, take warning. The worms will be feasting on you in a week. As for your wife who surpasses even you in this impiety, slavery will be her lot.' Grey Eyes was about to speak when I signed, let me, he nodded. I said, 'Oh foolish man, listen to this prophecy of mine. Before the moon rises to-night, your body will be burning, your teeth chattering, nor will relief come to you even from large doses of opium, for you have indulged in it so much in order to see visions that now it will become ineffective in your need. Go then, say your prayers, make your will; for two days at least the fever will torture you, and since you have not lived wisely but have been always vicious in your enjoyments, a cruel sadist and a debauchee, it may well kill you. I need no zodiacs, no sand-pictures, no crystal pieces, no dates and hours of birth, no table of lucky and unlucky days, to tell you this. A look at your face suffices, go.'

'Next morning, when I woke up and looked out of the window, I saw a silent crowd gathered below in the courtyard. The maid who came to tell me my bath was ready said in an awed voice, 'The great astrologer is very ill. Will he die? His first wife who is my aunt came to me to ask and is waiting outside.' 'I don't know any more than you or she,' I said. 'Tell her to stop being foolish and await whatever happens. Her place is by his bedside, not here.' Grey Eyes greeted me with a deep mocking bow. 'Prophetess,' he said. 'Save, oh save the great astrologer. I am the intermediary of several delegations that wait your pleasure below.' First let us have breakfast, I said, and then I'll tell them what I think of them. 'Look you,' I told them, 'I have no powers other than those all of you have. When the signs of serious illness are written on a man's face, I can read them just as much as anyone else with sufficient experience can. That is all. So go home. If you want him to live, give him the right treatment and pray to God. What is the right treatment? Many physicians would bleed him. Some would keep him in a dark room. I would open all the doors and windows, wrap his body in sheets of cold water from time to time, give him a sherbet of fresh lime and leave it at that. Let us hope if he lives he will be wiser and give up all this hocus-pocus humbug. If he dies, let us hope you will be wiser and refuse to get led away in future by such superstitions.' On the third day he died and when I left next day for my own charge, crowds of people turned out to look at me, solemn and awed, not a smile among the

lot. I said to Grey Eyes, 'I feel like weeping. Why are they so overcome? What have I done to them?' Shaking hands he said, 'You have taken away one of their most cherished illusions. No longer will at least the sensible among you well, Princess. To our next meeting.'

"We talked also of religion, of the dominance priests and preachers acquired over simple people, of how they sometimes proved themselves utterly unworthy of trust. She said she had come across the followers of many religions, and had always found no difficulty in distinguishing the good man from the bad. What a person did was much more important from the point of view of the society in which he lived and of the government of that nation than what he believed. The true importance of religion lay not in ceremonies and prayers, but in the values it taught. These made for noble living in most religions. Grey Eyes, she said, had particularly liked a saying he had heard from a travelling monk of a strange religion that the monk said had spread as far as Chin, 'Be thou a lamp unto thyself.' Therein he thought was enshrined the true dignity of man. Religious precepts and guidance took man so far. But in the end if he was not a lamp unto himself, that greatness of spirit that is the essence of nobility could not be achieved. I argued that for most people it was difficult enough to abide by their own religious teaching. How then could they go beyond that to judge for themselves? Her answer was not beyond that, but further along the line of that, for has not the creator implanted a divine spark in every human being, and is that spark never to light a lamp within him by which he too will see clearly his path?

"By then we had reached the neighbourhood of the lady Roumela's father's estate, and the Khanum arranged us in proper order. First rode three trumpeters, gay in bright colours, carrying no weapons. Then she herself, all in white with a heaven-blue headcloth and in her formidable right hand a bouquet of white roses. Two lengths behind her, I on her right and Dhanji on her left. We made a brave show, Sir, though I say it myself, Dhanji in spotless white with his turban displaying the service colour strips and his waist a similar cummerbund, on his left chest a blue and white silk rosette

that the Khanum had insisted on his putting on that morning, I in full uniform, the well-polished medals on my chest sending off flashes of light as the sun's rays fell on them. Dhanji carried in his right hand a bunch of sweet peas, and in the front fold of my turban were fixed three cream roses. Two lengths behind us rode the Khanum's Major Domo and her Chief Steward, elderly men, grave and dignified, looking extremely respectable even in their blue festive robes. Followed four maids, nice-looking young women, each in a dress of a different colour, with in front of her on a covered tray a complete dress for the offeree. Behind them came four young pages, handsome boys of about twelve, most ornamental in their different colourful costumes, high turbans and red leather riding boots, in front of each a covered tray of exquisite sweetmeats, made under the Khanum's personal supervision. She had, I learned later, let the boys eat their fill of them the previous evening so as to make sure they would not touch a single one from the trays they carried. Behind them rode three men-at-arms fully accoutred, but with their axe-blades covered with garlands. It was a splendid sight, Sir, a triumph of discipline, each file in line, keeping its proper distance from the next all moving together as one. I ventured to congratulate the Khanum, especially as there had been no previous practice of all together so far as I knew. She said with a laugh, 'I have made five thousand move as one, these are but twenty, and eighteen of my own household.'

As we approached the main gate, the trumpets sent forth a visiting call, low-high-low-very high-high-low it went. Almost before the last note had died down, a dozen armed men took up their position by the gate. An officer challenged, 'Who comes ?' as we halted in good order a little beyond the gate. The middle trumpet replied with the call of amity, a swaying, curling, long-drawn out call and as it ended rode forward a little and said loudly, 'your neighbour Zubeida Khanum in friendship on a joyous mission accompanied by two representatives of His Honour, the Hakim.' From a tower on the wall by the gate, a senior officer who had obviously been observing our party carefully ordered, 'Open gates. Present arms. Distinguished visitors' party to enter.' At a walk we entered, our perfect formation drawing a sigh of admiration from the soldiers. At the

same pace we rode up the mile to the house, the trumpets playing soft, lilting airs before us. At the steps that led up to the main hall they stopped and burst forth into the most glorious fanfare I have ever heard. Ending, all three wheeled round and bowing low to the Khanum backed their horses pace by pace to the side. The Khanum dismounted, not in her usual style of a straight jump down, but elaborately and with precision. Dhanji and I did the same and formed line behind her. I noticed the rest of our party sat mounted, as they must have been instructed to do. Down the steps came the Master of the house and bowing low said, 'Noble lady, how delightful to have the honour of receiving you. This is indeed a privilege beyond price. Thrice welcome indeed your gracious presence.' At this the Khanum interrupted, 'To be with you is indeed gratifying, but as to welcome you must hear why I am here before you truly welcome me. I would not take advantage of your ignorance of my purpose.' 'Certainly,' said the Master, 'but you will deign to enter my poor abode before you speak, will you not?' 'Certainly,' said the Khanum, 'I shall and bring with me these worthy gentlemen, the heads of the official and private households of he who calls himself the servant of the laws and whom men call lord.' The master bowed to us and we in reply bowed low. He led the way up the steps, escorted the Khanum to a high chair, took a seat opposite her and offered us seats. I shook my head and we took station I on the right and Dhanji on the left of the Khanum. 'I have come to visit your grace,' said the Khanum, 'because it struck me forcibly the other day that in all our histories (my father's house has been here for a thousand years as you know and yours for six hundred as we know) never despite all the vicissitudes of time, have we been opposed to one another or come into conflict with one another. Of heroes on your side, of doughty fighters on ours, there has never been a lack, yet the workings of Providence have always preserved amity among them. This it seemed to me was so singular a record in this troubled land that I felt moved to do something to bring us more together. I have a great-nephew Alfresun, the last of my line. You have a daughter Roumela whom I have met and approve of. A union between them that distinguishes our relationship. As Alfresun has no senior male relative to sponsor this proposal our Hakim, rightly called lord by common acclaim, aware of this situation authorised me to proclaim him co-sponsor with myself. There was, he said, no better fighter, no better farmer, no better citizen in his whole area than Alfresun, yes,

no more likable young man, and so he would consider it a privilege to help in having him established as a householder, for the greater good not only of himself and his bride, but also of the country as a whole. The lord has sent his representatives, the valiant Mohamed Khan, Naik, and the worthy Dhanji. This then is our offer, my great-nephew for your daughter. I know this cannot be settled at once to-day, you will need some time, a day or two, to answer finally. If you are prepared to consider it, however, the usual procedure, sweets, dresses, etc., can proceed. If to you it is anathema to begin with, say so and in this fashion we shall not trouble you.' 'Provided it is understood that consideration does not mean consent, that it is just the beginning of pourparlers, of course there must be consideration of an offer that comes under such noble and distinguished auspices,' said the Master. 'Alfresun himself I know to be a most worthy young man, a true noble, greatly respected, yet much else has also to be thought of. Proceed then, Nobility. I see my wife, daughter and the whole family have already joined us.'

## XXVIII

At a sign from the Khanum, Dhanji went to the steps and clapped his hands. Up the steps walked with great dignity the Major Domo and Chief Steward. Coming up to a few paces from where their mistress and the Master were seated, they bowed low first to her and then to the Master. They then took their places behind the Khanum's chair. An interval of a couple of minutes, and the first of the maids entered, walking gracefully and slowly, displaying to the best advantage the lovely dress upon her tray, complete with embroidered head-cloth to brocaded shoes. Having ended her walk up the hall, among exclamation of admiration from the company which now lined several-fold both walls of the long room, she passed again in front of the principal ladies, giving them a fuller view, then moved to a table near the top of the room, slid her tray on it and stood

behind, her pose that of the gracious lady universally admired. Followed the second maid, with the natural dancer's sway, on her tray another exquisite dress, this time in velvet, and went through the same routine. Followed the third and fourth. I will not trouble you, Sir, with further descriptions, but truly have I seen no sight more exquisite. The lady Roumela's eyes were shining as she watched eagerly and when, their task completed, the four dresses displayed on the table, their fair custodians stood behind them, spontaneously applause rippled through the hall again and again. With great delicacy, the first maid placed a finger on each ear-hole and made a slight bow as if with high disdain. Everyone burst into laughter, except the Khanum, who sat unmoved, magnificent and serene.

Then entered the gaily-clad, smiling pages two by two, their trays loaded with every imaginable kind of sweet, set pieces of sugar and almond and spices, in the middle of each tray, a castle, a garden, a cottage, a well, surrounded by dainties galore. Walking to the four corners of the room, they criss-crossed, slowly, sedately, then swiftly, with halts at crucial spots, seeming as it were to play a game all their own, displaying to the greatest advantage their cargoes to the company. Every time they seemed about to stop, fresh applause urged them on, until at last the Master rose, and making a very deep bow to the Khanum said, 'Unrivalled in spectacle as in all else are you, as gracious as valiant. Never have I seen such beauty so wonderfully exhibited. I am sure my consort thinks the same.' His wife, a rather haughty-looking sour matron said, 'Undoubtedly. As usual your highness leaves us all far behind. I confess I was looking forward to the jewellery which is usually the first item on such occasions, but perhaps-,' 'Jewel pieces, rings, earrings, bracelets and such I consider trumpery and so there are none,' said the Khanum calmly. A gasp of disbelief went up from the company. Was she being purposely offensive? 'When Roumela Banoo becomes my great niece this is what she will wear.' From inside her dress she drew a silk bag and handed it to me.

Slowly I took out from it the most wonderful of necklaces, a stream of light that holding in my two hands, I felt I could scarcely hold, it might flow away at any minute. I held it up by its two ends and displayed it. A dead silence fell upon the assemblage, the lady of the house devouring it with her eyes and making clutching

movements unconsciously with her fingers. The Khanum pointed to a small table with a black velvet covering on it. Two attendants sprang to bring it forward. 'Spread it on that,' she said to me in a low voice, 'and let them all look their fill. Hand on dagger all the while though. Gazing at it may no doubt drive many a man mad. That woman, too, watch. I'm sorry to impose this on you, but you're the only one capable of handling it.' I did as directed, standing with my left hand on the end of the necklace, my right on the dagger in my belt. Dhanji moved to the other side to moderate any rush there might be. And so we stood at attention while people came and looked and looked and sighed and went only to come back again.

Meanwhile the Khanum had risen. The Master, his mind divided between the necklace and his duty as host, hesitatingly rose too, and Roumela Banoo assisting, took her out into the shady garden. When after an hour she returned, I was beginning to feel extremely weary and Dhanji told me later if it had gone on for another five minutes he was sure he would have fainted. The tension was great, all those watching, eager, longing eyes. Appearing behind the Master's wife, who had sat there gazing all the time, the Khanum said, 'What, not satisfied of its genuineness yet, dear lady? It's not only genuine but also dangerous. Anyone trying to get wrongful possession of it, it kills. So admire it, friends, by all means, but do not go beyond that.' So saying she picked it up and bestowed it on her person. Everybody there seemed to wake as from a dream. The Khanum looked concernedly at Dhanji and me then said, 'H'm, I left it too long. Ah, Roumela, here are Mohamed Khan and Dhanji needing food and drink and rest.'

Roumela Banoo led us into a small room, put us at a round table, sat down with us, served us and smiling talked to us until the strain gradually left us. 'You were not affected, lady?' I asked. 'I saw you leave almost immediately.' 'Gems and I have a natural affinity,' she said. 'It is my gipsy blood and name, I suppose, but I do not crave for them feverishly as most people do and they do not fascinate me into insensibility to my surroundings.' 'Fortunate indeed is Alfresun Khan,' said I, 'for the necklace will not take your mind away from him.' She blushed most becomingly and said in a low voice, 'You know then?' 'Naturally, lady, our officer does not send us on missions without briefing,' said I. 'Will all go well? Tell me,

as you would him for it is for him I ask.' 'I wish I knew,' she said, 'the Khanum's impact is terrible. What a magnificent offering she presented! I shall remember it for all my life. But will it outweigh my step-mother's ambition and hopes for her own sons, and her influence with my father? I do not know. She intends me for the Prince of M. and is daily awaiting messages from a close confidant. A grand alliance would gratify her vanity and I would be far away, something she's always wanted. It's quite a tangle, isn't it?' 'Assuredly all will be well, lady,' said Dhanji. 'Our lord by himself can move mountains and now we have the most formidable Khanum in support. That poor Prince, he doesn't know what he is up against.' 'You cheer me greatly,' said the lady laughing. 'Come, let's go and see what's happening.'

What was happening was that the Khanum having been told by the Master that he would need at least three days and probably more to come to a decision, and urged most strongly to remain as his guest until then along with Dhanji and myself, was engaged in sending back her entourage. One man-at-arms and one maid she kept, the rest she sent off, for to be a welcome guest she said meant always causing the least trouble and expense to the host. He had been most anxious that she should keep all of them, but she knew better. That evening we heard part of the first Roumela story from a bard with a really fine voice and a proper sense of timing. An argument arose about whether there was not exaggeration in the version that made the hero sever three heads so quickly as to have them in the air at the same time. After much discussion all turned to the Khanum who had listened in silence. She signed to her man-at-arms, who in a trice brought in her axe, by name 'Shadman'. She rose, shook it, and with a double flourish to the Master, said, 'Forward, three. Win glory or death.' Hastily he intervened, reminding her of the amity she had spoken of. 'Really,' she said, 'this is most disappointing. All my hopes of a good fight you shatter. Well never mind, we'll try to settle the argument another way. Bring me three lay figures that use as targets.' Three wooden men were carried in. She set them in position, one in front, one on each side, all as if ready to attack. Then, making the hall ring with the war-cry axe flashed. The first head was still in the air when she severed the second, but reached the ground just as the third was struck off. 'Two,

yes, but not three,' she said, 'still that hero could have done it. I am but an old woman now, and even at the best of times, might have had to concede him better.' 'God in Heaven, lady,' said the Master, 'truly are you the axeman of our time. I doubt if anyone could have bettered you.' And so the evening ended.

Next afternoon I received a message that the Khanum would like me to accompany her on a ride at 3 p.m. I had heard her at the midday meal in animated converse with the Master and lady of the house. They were discussing the economy of a 'great estate' and finally the Khanum said, 'You really ought to get my Marie Louise to examine your working in all its aspects. You'd have to ask her and her husband to spend a fortnight with you and be completely frank with her. Then if she thought you deserved advice, she would give you the best. Otherwise she would be just a very pleasant guest whom you'd enjoy having. Whether the same can be said of her husband you must decide for yourself. You know him, of course, the Guardian of the High Mountain, my cousin Firdaus.' The lady shuddered and the Master said, 'Yes, yes, he is also a distant connection of ours, and but for that would not have left this hall alive the last time he was here. You know the madcap not only rode his horse into the hall, but proceeded to make it leap over the heads of the people eating at the long table and all the time he was shouting with laughter. I was just about to order that he be cut down, when a flung knife caught his turban at the top and scattered it over the floor at his own horse's feet. So amazed he looked that everybody began laughing at him. Thus a tragedy was averted, for after that he dismounted, and except for his unusually loud voice, behaved quite civilly. I believe I know who threw the knife but thought it best to make no inquiries. No, that cousin of yours, dear lady, can scarcely be anyone's idea of a pleasant house-guest.' 'Well, no Firdaus, no Marie Louise and no streamlining of your management. However, I don't suppose it matters very much to you, so let's forget it,' said the Khanum. 'Could we not have her without him, perhaps for just a week ? She must be lonely sometimes when he is out foraying. Very little to do among those barren hills, I should think, for a lady of her quality,' said the Mistress. 'I doubt it,' said the Khanum, 'They love one another and when that tie is there between wife and husband absence is unbearable. I doubt if he leaves her for more than a day at most. However try asking her if you like ?' And as

the lady looked at her eagerly, 'No, I won't intervene to urge her. Love to me too is sacred, apart from which the two together delight my aesthetic sense. I don't think I've ever seen anything more beautiful. They really are the most handsome creatures and an inward glow makes their faces radiant when they look at one another. God protect them.' 'A great poetess was lost, most eloquent, when you donned the poshak,' said the Master. 'Had it been otherwise, your songs would have spread round the world.' 'Had it been otherwise, I would not have met Grey Eyes and what use would life have been without that?' And for the rest of the meal she remained abstracted.

When she came out to her waiting steed at three, and vaulted into the saddle, I knew it was the soldier, not the formal lady, who was in command again. As soon as we got into reasonably clear country, her pace increased. When we'd gone about three miles, she spoke, 'Roumela should be around here. I brought you out so that we could speak to her in private. There's a very hard streak in these people, you've noticed it, haven't you? and I nodded. 'I don't know how wise Alfresun has been in setting his heart on her. However, the lightning struck him and so far as I can make out, her too, simultaneously, so we can only carry on. Ah, there she is.' Riding up at a gallop, the girl came to a halt exactly in front of us, and bowing low, waited. Eyeing her critically, the Khanum said, 'Good. Now answer this. Are you prepared to give up your claim to your goodly inheritance in order to have a not-too-well-off husband of your own choice? Your father hates to think of having to divide his estate, and one of his principal reasons for wanting you married far away is that a son-in-law at a long distance, even if he makes a claim, will never be able to enforce it. A son-in-law of Alfresun's calibre next door is quite another matter. If he lets things rest now, he may raise the question whenever a favourable opportunity occurs. So to get your father's consent, you and he must be prepared to give up most solemnly all claims to your inheritance now or at any later date, not only on behalf of yourselves but of your unborn children. If you agree, I shall manage to convey to your father this undertaking on Alfresun's behalf. I really oughtn't to do t without consulting him, but we won't even get off the ground if I don't, and I have little doubt Alfresun's mind and heart are so full of you that talk of gaining or losing property would leave him utterly unmoved. Now it's up to you.'

Roumela's face grew stern as the Khanum ended. 'But I am much more the heir than my milk-and-water brother,' she said. 'I mean them no harm, but I am Roumela and this is our land just as much because of the first Roumela, my great-grandmother as of my great-grandfather. My share I will take and hold. I do not think so meanly of Alfresun as even to consider his not wanting that.' The Khanum shrugged her shoulders and rode slowly on, leaving Roumela and me to follow. 'Look, lady,' I said, 'your indignation is understandable and I sympathise with it. Who would wish to give up such lovely land rightly hers ? But the point simply is we want this marriage with your father's consent and the consent is not at all likely to be forthcoming if this condition is not accepted. Can you get him to agree directly ? If so, no one will be better pleased than her Grace and my master. You know you cannot, you know also, if you do anything rash like disappearing quietly with Alfresun, not only will your lives not be worth a moment's purchase but a blazing, roaring fire will sweep the countryside and by the time it is over, all of us may be charred corpses. You do not think her Grace, my officer or even I are afraid of Death ? You know we are not, but we would die to some purpose if we have to die, not just be the victims of blind, futile, passionate forces. What shall land profit you when Alfresun is lying dead with a dozen mutilating wounds in front of your eyes and you are bound to a tree to be tortured to death ? I do not wish to be harsh, but the beginning of wisdom is to see things as they are and not shut your mind and eyes to the consequences most likely to follow from them as they are. I am old enough to have a daughter your age,—praise be to God I only have a couple of sons—my wife is distantly connected with your family, so I speak to you as an elder, an uncle. I would have you happy, so sink your pride, girl, and learn reason. There, I have done.' Looking thoroughly sullen, Roumela answered, 'I can't do it, I won't. What is ours, we keep, that's my blood and I won't be false to that. Besides who's ever done such a thing, given up their heritage ? I tell you I shall keep it and shall also marry Alfresun. My great grandmother whose name I bear was not called the Wise Woman, the Dreaded Woman for nothing.'

'Congratulations then my dear and we may not have an opportunity to meet privately again before Mohamed Khan, D'Ranji and I

leave, farewell and all good fortune attend you,' said the Khanum. 'You see it is much better to retire in good time and not wait for the refusal that is inevitable in the circumstances. But before we part, I'll answer your question, who's ever done such a thing ? Well, I did. I, an only daughter, gave up my share of my father's estate, then almost as extensive as yours today, to get his consent and remove all obstacles to my marriage with Grey Eyes. I suppose, despite my soldiering, I was at heart softer than you, so I gave up spontaneously, and God be praised, never have I had any cause to regret it To love, to be loved, freely, happily, in concord, to me no treasure on earth seemed or seems equal to that. However, I do not resent your decision. The Naik Sahib has put the whole matter to you clearly and fully. I am sure his officer would approve and applaud his presentation And you have chosen. So let's ride back. You know, after a real defeat, I've always felt I want to sing. So join me, will you, in the saint-poet's

The battle is lost, is lost, is lost,
The future is dark, is dark, is dark,
Shall we recover, ever recover,
Ever, ever, ever recover ?

I have no hope that I'm not sad,
For what is hope but a dream when awake ?

The battle is lost, is lost, is lost
The future is dark, is dark, is dark,
But my spirit's alive and so it will be
Till God takes me to Paradise.

Admiring heartily the great lady, I joined with gusto in the song, during which it was evident from Roumela's face that a conflict was going on in her mind.

As the song ended, she spurred her horse until she had passed the Khanum, then stopping in front of her she said, 'Aunt, you are deserting me.' 'Am I ?' said the Khanum. 'Well, if you really think that, I'll stay on and take the bitter refusal in person; if that makes you feel any better, certainly I'll do that.' 'Oh, aunt,' said Roumela and a suspicion of tears appeared in her eyes. The Khanum leant over, took her by the waist, lifted her off her horse, and folding her in her embrace, said, 'There, dear child, weep your fill on my shoulder.

You are a goose but never mind that. We'll do whatever you want, I promise you.' And to me, 'Go away Mohamed Khan and come back after ten minutes.' I rode off, full of wonder at the working of feminine minds, even of so great a general's as Zubeida Khanum. When I trotted back, Roumela was on her own horse and with a smile said to me, 'The wisdom of your arguments is irresistible, so I agree to what you have suggested.' 'Praise be to God, lady,' I said, 'I am sure you will never regret it.' 'That I will,' she said, 'but it is better thus.' 'I have told her, Mohamed Khan, not to think this is the end of all the hurdles. But with it we're certainly across one of the most important,' said the Khanum.

Next afternoon, when we rode out again the Khanum told me she had conveyed Alfresun's renunciation on behalf of himself, his wife and his children-to-be to the Master, who could scarcely hide his great satisfaction at it, however much he tried. Still he talked ponderously of strokes of statesmanship, and alliances in high quarters as a means of consolidating like-minded forces in these difficult times. The Khanum had told him we could not keep on dawdling there, despite his delightful hospitality and he had said the whole matter was being considered most carefully and he hoped soon to be ready with his answer. Via Dhanji she had learned they were expecting an urgent message from the North. The lazier of the women servants were already thinking with relief of Roumela's departure far away, for she alone kept a strict watch on the household working. The lady of the house was fairly useless and could easily be taken in. Commented the Khanum, 'She will not bring Alfresun land, but she will certainly bring commonsense.' We rode fast and even furiously that day, for this enforced staying-on chafed the Khanum and she wanted to get the vexation out of her system.

Next morning she took me into the second garden and said she had learned from Dhanji the messenger had come and with very welcome tidings. The lady of the house was delighted. 'Thank God,' she had said to her special tirewoman, 'we need have nothing to do with that giantess. She'll soon be going home with a flea in her ear, and I shall be the mother-in-law of the Prince of M. I'll marry his young sister to my eldest son, you'll see.' The Master, she had found, was closeted with his councillors. She

suggested now was a good time for me to leave and bring you up-to-date with a fully detailed account. 'Tell him,' she said, 'I am not in despair yet. I still have one trick to play and that may take the game, but I won't tell you about that now. Tell him also that failing all else I will look after Roumela, until such time as with safety, a year or so hence perhaps, Alfresun can marry her, who will then be bearing a different name and bring her home from a distant city. Tell him that is entirely my business. He will not come into it at all. Nor will even a suspicion be aroused that Alfresun had anything to do with her disappearance from here. It may well be even after her betrothal to the Prince. So no bloodfeud will arise. However, I hope to be with him tomorrow, and will explain everything myself. And if my graceless great nephew is at the camp, tell him I shall expect him for lunch at my house day after tomorrow. We have worked well together, Naik Sahib. God-speed and good fortune,' and the gracious lady took my hand and shook it as a fellow-soldier would. 'I'll make your excuses,' she said, 'your duty called you away.' Obviously, sitting there she's worked the whole thing out and of course Roumela now will do everything she says. So I'm not uneasy, Sir. In either case, I feel our crisis is over." "Well," said the Assistant Collector, "I'll reserve judgment for the moment. I'm greatly obliged to you for all that you have done in this complicated affair and especially for your frank talk to the lady Roumela. Time we were in bed. Good-night, Mohamed Khan, sleep well." Putting out his office lamp, the Assistant Collector turned into the side-room, and dropping his clothes about anyhow, tumbled into bed to fall into the dreamless sleep that, if he had but known it, is one of God's greatest blessings to man.

# XXIX

The lamps had been lit next evening, and the Assistant Collector was struggling with a tough report about a dispute over varying boundaries and tenures along the river bank, looking up references and making notes, when the Naik announced, "The Sheristedar Sahib." "Well, Pribhdasji" asked the Assistant Collector, pointing to a chair. The Sheristedar sat down and said, "It's about the child, Sir. What have you decided?" "Ah Pyari Banoo, nothing I'm afraid. Why, is she making a nuisance of herself?" asked the Assistant Collector. "No, no, she's good as gold, but she seems to have made up her mind she is going to live here with us, and since that's not possible, the sooner something's fixed, the better for her." "Let's have her in," said the Assistant Collector. A few minutes later, the little girl came in, carrying the toy her father had left her and, with a low bow, stood waiting. "Take that chair, Pyari Banoo," said the Assistant Collector, "and help us with your advice. It's not possible for you, dear child, to remain always in this camp of men, is it? You must meet women, be educated, learn the right things. So, now, tell us, is there no relative of your father's or mother's you could go and live with? A small allowance might be forthcoming from a fund I have at my disposal so that you would be no burden on them." "No, lord, there are none," said the girl firmly, "besides I am very happy here, so please let me stay." "God give me patience," reflected the Assistant Collector, and was just about to speak when the Naik entered and said, "The great poet and his Begum crave audience for just a moment. They are on their way to a cousin of his and feel they cannot go on without presenting their respects." "Welcome, welcome" cried the Assistant Collector, springing up from his chair and hastening to the tent-door. "Truly this is great pleasure you bestow upon us ordinary mortals, oh Master of Poetry," and with a quick glance at the smiling face of the ex-inmate of the House of Joy,

"Oh Queen of Song." "We came to offer our most grateful thanks, lord," she said; "not to take up your inestimable time" he added. "Sit down," said the Assistant Collector, "there is always plenty of time for the really worthwhile. But I forgot. You know Pribhdasji, of course, Poet, and this young lady is Pyari Banoo." The poet bowed low to Pribhdas, who bowed even lower, while the Assistant Collector explained to the lady that Pribhdas was probably the foremost calligraphist in the land. "Ah, yes," she said, "I have a copy by him of the first twenty gazals of the saint-poet; truly more comforting work I have never seen," and she bowed to him with a smile.

When all had been seated, and Anwar had served tea or coffee and cakes, the poet said, "The Red-Beard menace you quashed very effectively. I followed your other advice, lord, and am very happy." "Your counsel was most wise, oh seer," said the lady. "Come, come," said the Assistant Collector, "give praise to whom it is due. God in his mercy wished you well and so it became. Now surely this happy occasion must be cefebrated with a song. Our great poet has no doubt been inspired by the recent happy sequence of events." The husband and wife gazed at one another, then she rose and taking her stand, raised her magnificent voice in "The Coming of Spring," her husband's latest composition. For nearly a minute after she ended there was complete silence, then they all burst out in applause. "Now," said the Assistant Collector, "I truly understand the saying 'my ears in Heaven, my feet in flowery meads,' and Pribhdasji nodded his head emphatically in agreement. Pyari Banoo's wonder-struck eyes gazing at her caused the singer to say, "I am sure this charming young lady has also a voice. May we not hear her ?" Blushing the little girl shook her head vigorously, and on being pressed further said in a low tone, "After that magic ? No, oh no, no, no."

From the door spoke a formidable voice very gently, "Pyari Banoo, I want to hear you. Sing, sweetheart, sing." A kind of panic seemed to seize the little girl. For a moment she looked around distractedly as if to find a way to escape. Then slowly, she got off her chair and walking to the door bowed and touched the ground at the feet of the Presence standing there. Two great hands lifted her off the ground, the voice said, "Bless you," and she found herself, with a pat on the cheek, standing on the Assistant Collector's

single-plank dining table. Her confidence completely restored, she sang that most dramatic and powerful of the saint-poet's question songs.

"Who is great, truly great.
Know ye, kings of the world ?
In armies and treasuries, skilled ministers, great generals,
In poets and scholars, astrologers, magicians,
In power and strategy, in art and in science,
Find ye greatness ?
Pah, dust, mere dust, plain, dirty dust !"

and after two more verses, the final.

"See ye the soul ? No. Yet there greatness lies,
Learn ye then, kings, to recognise the soul,
Its sign is magnanimity, its symbol serenity,
Rare among the great of the world, the truly great.
Oh Powerful, repent,
To the world there is an end."

The clear, fresh, young voice singing this mighty song, made a deep impression on all the listeners. After a moment's pause, the little girl started again on the last verse and her whole audience joined in with her. At the end Zubeida Khanum lifted her off the table and saying "Well done" sent her back to the chair on which she had been sitting.

She then turned to the Assistant Collector, who on first hearing her voice had jumped up to receive her but had, at a sign from her, not interrupted, 'Forgive me, lord, for thus unceremoniously having taken charge of the proceedings, but when I rode up with Dhanji so marvellous a voice fell on my ears that I just sat and listened, and the rest followed. But surely this is a most unusual happening in this normally busy centre of public business. Is it permissible to enquire the reason ?" Bowing the Assistant Collector drew forward a chair for her and when she was seated said, "The reason, most gracious, a most unexpected and welcome visit from the Master of poetry and his bride, the Queen of Song," and he nodded in turn to the poet and his wife. As the poet rose and bowed low, Zubeida Khanum said, "So, graceless, you get married without even letting me know ! Well, you don't seem to have done too badly.

Still, let's see." In a stride, she was by the lady's chair, had taken her chin between her thumb and first finger, and was gazing deep into her eyes. After a full minute, she let go her hold and bending forward, kissed the bride on the right cheek. "You are welcome," she said. "A good human being you are and you will make a good wife. And should you ever be tempted otherwise, remember I stand behind him, for of all my adopted nephews, he is first in my regard. But enough, both of you come and spend a week with me next month and we shall have much time for talk."

By now Pribhdas was getting up and looking at the little girl to remind her to accompany him. So the Assistant Collector spoke up, "Your Grace has arrived just in time to help us with your advice in the matter of Pyari Banoo here." He described the circumstances which had brought the child to the camp and ended with, "And what do you think?" Zubeida Khanum said to the girl, "Would you care to come and live with me?" and as she cast a longing look at the Assistant Collector, "Aye, no doubt you would prefer to live with him. But then you see you can't. He can't be your father alone. He will tell you without even the glimmer of a smile, that he is the father and mother and also the servant of everybody in this territory, including even me, so you're not likely to have any exclusive rights in him. He'll be your guardian, of course, co-guardian with me. What do you say?" "You'll be my guardian?" asked Pyari Banoo. "Yes," said the Assistant Collector. "All right then," said the little girl, "I shall come with you, Greatness, and try and serve you loyally." Then running to the Assistant Collector "Please pick me up." The Assistant Collector did so, and found himself both her arms round his neck, being kissed on both his eyes and the forehead. "God bless you, little one," he said as he put her down, a quite suspicious moisture in his eyes. Pribhdas took the child away, and the poet and his wife rose to go. The great singer said as they bid him farewell, "You felt like crying, lord, so did I and so I could see did my husband. Well that's the reward of true greatness, the spontaneous love and trust of a child" and bending down she kissed his hand. The poet clasped him in both his arms, then stepping back, bowed low, and saying "Good fortune attend you always, dear friend" stepped backwards to the tent-door. The Assistant Collector stood in the middle of the room for a minute or two unheedingly, then turned to the Khanum, who said "Quite affecting wasn't it

co-sponsor ? My own eyes were not altogether dry; however"..and as Dhanji appeared at her side with sherry on the tray, "Ah Dhanji, good, as usual you turn up at just the right moment."

Both sipped their sherry in silence for a space, then said Zubeida Khanum, "And now to your office-chair, Sir, to listen to my report. Result : Mission successful. Date of fruition: If you agree, marriage two weeks from tomorrow. Place of Marriage: Roumela's house. Comments ?" "Only the deepest admiration for your magnificent effort, dear Zoe Banoo," said the Assistant Collector, "you have saved the countryside. I do not think I can ever repay the debt of gratitude I owe you. I also know I'd much rather owe it to you than anyone else in the world." "Good," she said and put her hand out across the table to the Assistant Collector who took it and shook it warmly. "Well, now," she said, "you'd like to know, no doubt, what happened after the Naik left and how the Master made up his mind suddenly after keeping us hanging so long. Last evening, after dinner, for once there was no entertainment. Gradually the hall emptied, until there were only he and I and a couple of bottles of rather good wine at the head table. Nobody being within earshot, I said in a rather mystified voice, 'I wonder.' We had been talking about all manner of things, battles, genealogies, commerce, ghosts, governments, seeds, and he was in a very kindly mood. 'Wonder what ?' he asked. 'Doesn't it strike you as somewhat strange that Alfresun should have fallen in so readily with my suggestion that I should offer for your Roumela, and that Roumela too should have been so friendly and forthcoming to me. No resistance, no show of reluctance even, on either side, remarkable when you come to think of how utterly contrary most young people are today. A strange phenomenon !' 'Yes,' he said after puzzling over it for some time, 'I agree. What can be the explanation ?' 'Well,' said I, 'as a woman I can think of one obvious one, but since being a soldier also, I have no desire to be cut down in your hall, I shall keep it to myself.' 'God in Heaven,' he exclaimed, his hand feeling for the axe at his side, 'you mean they've met, they've been together. Well this axe will soon settle that.' And he made as if to rush from the room. 'Sit down,' I said, 'Master, and don't make a fool of yourself. I have told you I know nothing, I was only making a conjecture. So you have nothing at all to go upon. You're not utterly mad, are you, to kill the daughter you love and bring disgrace on your house because an

old friend after a very good dinner lets her mind go wandering. And don't keep on fingering that axe so much. Splendour of God, why I'll take you on and kill you myself before I let your murderous hands go anywhere near that poor, sweet child. Understand ?' I said in a very General-of-the Northern-Frontier voice. He sat brooding, his whole being revolted at the thought that his daughter could have let herself and him down so.

'Well, I must go to bed,' he said at last; 'I'm sorry, friend,' I said, 'but I'm not letting you go anywhere near your womenfolk in the frame of mind in which you are. I know when the Devil rides roughshod over our brains. I have it. When did you last hold a vigil ?' 'Many years ago.' 'Well, tonight you and I will both hold one.' 'Hey, there,' I called out, and as some servants appeared, 'Cold water, first, big jars, and then white robes, plain, for your master and myself. Clear the dais, now our weapons on this platform, my axe, daggers and knife on this side, yours on the other, good. We're for the vigil tonight and right up to after sunrise. No movement beyond kneeling or standing up. Ready.' He did not say anything, but allowed himself to be stripped and the very cold water to be poured over him. So did I in my turn, almost unaware that men's eyes were upon my naked body. Soon we were in our white robes facing one another and the vigil had begun. The first three hours of a vigil must pass in complete silence, then prayers may be said at intervals of not less than two hours. The idea is introspection, quiet, the soul listening to itself. For the first two hours, I watched my co-vigilant carefully, anxious lest he might suddenly rush out, then I saw from his eyes and face that the spirit of the vigil had taken possession of him, relaxed in regard to him and concentrated in regard to myself. The mystery of the vigil held me as it had held me when last Grey Eyes and I had undergone it together. There I stood, a soldier at attention, while the minutes passed into hours, utterly free of thought, remembrance, emotion, a great wind, so to speak, blowing through my heart and mind and soul. I seemed aware as from a great distance that sometimes the Master was reciting something, that occasionally he was on his knees, and then again on his feet. The full dawn came before I even stirred and then from my lips came no orthodox prayer but only 'The good shall prevail; yea, the good prevails.' And so we stood till the sun's rays filled the hall, and the men in attendance who had kept watch in relays, once again took off our robes,

poured enormous jugs of cold water over us, and dressed us in rose-scented, many-coloured silk robes. Then it was that we looked at one another properly and a smile broke on both our faces. 'Brother,' he said 'brother' and we shook hands warmly and enthusiastically. Breakfasting together on hot milk and **parathas** he said, 'You are right, our children are well-suited. Let the marriage be here on the sixteenth day.' 'Agreed,' I said, 'unless my co-sponsor has other ideas as to the date and place.' 'I don't think he will have,' he said smiling. 'Tell him I look forward to his attending very much.' 'Our party will arrive after lunch,' I said, 'and leave before dinner, if that is agreeable to you.' 'Aye,' he said 'that is best, the bride and groom by themselves without oppressive formalities. You know, brother, last night cleared my mind of a great deal of dross. I am very grateful to you.' 'And I to you,' I said, 'for the world became new to me, too.' Later, as soon as the household was together, he told them his decision, and so firmly that even his wife did not dare to look sour. Roumela was overjoyed and I had to look sternly at her several times to prevent her bubbling over in public. She rode three miles of the way with me when I left, and I warned her then to be on her guard and not let anyone get the impression she had known Alfresun before. Also it would do neither of them any harm to have no secret meetings for these sixteen days. 'Oh, please,' she cried, blushing like a rose. So there you are, co-sponsor, the picture is complete." The Assistant Collector rose and bowed very low, but before he could speak, Dhanji entered and said, "Your ladyship's hot water is in the small tent and dinner will be ready in half an hour." "What," cried Zubeida Khanum, "are you going to give me another treat as you did last time?" "Alas no," said Dhanji, "the time was too short. I'm afraid your ladyship will have to make do." "Don't worry," said the Khanum. "It'll be very good no doubt," and nodding to the Assistant Collector she went out.

Sipping gratefully the long drink Dhanji brought in to him, the Assistant Collector said, "Call in Pribhdasji and Mohamed Khan and come yourself," and when all three were there, "Well gentlemen, I'm happy to announce that the Alfresun-Roumela marriage will take place at the lady's father's mansion on the sixteenth day from today in the afternoon. We shall all attend. Her Grace has been most successful." "Praise be to God," came simultaneously from the Naik and

Pribhdas and the latter added, "Only yesterday I was considering what might happen if... and truly it would have been appalling. My most sincere congratulations to you, Sir." "Yes, indeed," murmured the Naik, and Dhanji, who had been preparing the table, turned and smiled at his employer, "It was all the great lady," said the Assistant Collector "with Mohamed Khan and Dhanji assisting. Both of you I thank very much for your excellent effort and you, too, Pribhdasji for your constant supervision and advice." Dhanji coughed, "By the way, Sir, as we were riding back the Khanum gave me a silk bag with five full gold pieces. When I said I could not take it she called it nonsense. I was her friend's private, not official servant, and she would like to know who in the world could prevent her from making this very small present to him. She was most indignant, Sir, and said she would throw the purse into the bushes if I did not forthwith put it in my pocket. Here it is." "Damnably awkward," said the Assistant Collector. "What do you say, Pribhdasji ?" "She is right, Sir. She is our friend, Dhanji is in our private service." "And you Mohamed Khan ?" "I agree with the Sheristedar Sahib. There's nothing wrong in it. Dhanji was in personal attendance upon her for so many days. She's entitled to give him a present. With me it would be different. The Master sent me a lovely sword when I was leaving, I took it, went in to bid good-bye and after thanking him very much, left it with him, saying, to him who served the sarkar under your honour, even a grain of another's rice was haram. He rose, bowed and shook hands." "Well, you're no doubt *right, but I'm not going to have any of us keeping anything given* by anybody here. Dhanji must have his present, the Khanum's feelings must not be hurt, but immediately after the wedding Dhanji must bake her a proper plum-pudding in which he will put 11 half gold pieces supplied by me, a half more than her five. This will be a present to her. And so we'll get square. Approved ?" Pribhdas and the Naik looked at one another, smiled and nodded. Dhanji said, "Now, Sir, the lady will soon be coming. Hadn't you better..."

Just as the Assistant Collector stepped in from the side-room, the Khanum entered. Straight she went to the table saying, "I'm hungry." Attacking heartily the minestrone Dhanji put before her, she went with equal gusto through the hot pot and caramel custard that followed, washing both down with draughts of the wine she

had brought with her. When Dhanji apologised for the ordinariness of the fare, she just smiled and said it was exactly what she wanted. Sitting in the canvas arm chair with her liqueur and coffee beside her, she thwarted all the Assistant Collector's efforts to thank her by saying, "Hush. What question of thanks can there be between you who call me Zoe Banoo and I who to you am Zoe Banoo as I was to another? Besides I was also doing this for my great nephew and my own family." Of numerous things they talked that evening like two old friends who did not need many words to understand one another, and when she rose to go he said, "I have never enjoyed an evening so much," and she answered, "and I very rarely too." Affectionately they shook hands, engaging to meet on the day of the wedding at a spot convenient to them both and ride down together.

What a wedding it was they attended, the great main hall crowded with colour and splendour. Everywhere the eye fell on wonderfully-robed, bewitchingly-bejewelled ladies and richly dressed gentlemen, their sword-hilts covered with garlands, their daggers hidden beneath lily bunches. Cheerful rose the hum of conversation interspersed with peals of laughter as the refreshments made their rounds. A hush fell on the assemblage when the bridegroom's party entered; first came the Khanum and the Assistant Collector, then Alfresun, supported just two paces behind by his own and the Khanum's steward on one side and the Sheristedar and the Naik on the other. Dhanji and the Khanum's Major Domo bringing up the rear. The Master and his wife came up to greet the party. He was in high good-humour. Still he cast a critical eye on Alfresun, but found nothing he could not approve.

The first business was the signing of the deed of renunciation by Alfresun. Loudly was it read out and aroused much comment. While some thought it was unfortunate, others said it proved he was not mercenary. Next came the arrangement of the bridegroom's party, Alfresun in the middle with the Assistant Collector two paces on the right and the Khanum two paces on the left, behind each their respective followers. A flurry outside and in walked what was generally conceded the handsomest couple there, the tremendous Firdaus and the most lovely Marie Louise. Firdaus looked out, "What,

cousin, trying to get married without us to watch you? I wouldn't have stood it, you know, no I wouldn't. Would have carried off your bride to my hill-castle and kept her on dry bread and cold water until you paid up handsomely, ha, ha," and he shook Alfresun by the hand vigorously. Marie Louise just stood looking at Alfresun. He took her hand and with a bow kissed it. "Bless you," she said, her eyes dimming as she led her husband to their place behind Zubeida Khanum. Now, the bride entered from the other end of the hall, her father and mother on her right and left and behind them a long train of relatives and retainers. Exactly opposite they took their places, and a sudden radiance seemed to flash from the eyes of the lovers as they looked intently at one another. Zubeida Khanum stepped forward and calling out, "God's Grace be always with you," slipped the necklace round the bride's neck. A special light seemed to have entered the hall, outshining all other lights there, while all present gazed at the necklace and its wearer in awe and silence. Followed the simple ceremony and soon they were man and wife.

"Lord," said Roumela Banoo, after she and her husband had bowed down to the ground to receive his blessings, "do you know who is the most impressive man among all those here?" "Who can decide when all are such champions?" said the Assistant Collector. "I am too dazzled by the splendid costumes to be able to choose." "Why, you, of course," she said, 'in your simple blue suit, with your service tie and your buttonhole of crimson sweetpeas. Yes, you are head and shoulders above all the others, even including my own Alfresun." "Hush," said the Assistant Collector, "let no one hear you lest I be challenged left and right. This is an occasion of amity, remember." And he turned away smiling to find next to him the beautiful Marie Louise who said, "It's quite true, the Khanum was saying it to me only a few minutes ago." "You are too kind, dear lady," murmured the Assistant Collector and turned to congratulate Alfresun's steward. Soon the Master took him off to eat and drink and rest in privacy. There it was that Zubeida Khanum found him saying, "No, keep sitting" sat down opposite him. "Well, your ladyship?" asked the Assistant Collector. "Very well indeed, Sir" was the smiling reply. "The evaluation report would no doubt be; Planning, 80 per cent; Implementation, 105 per cent. Yes, you and I can look back with satisfaction on this well-accomplished task."

"You carried me through, most generous; my part was at best minor," said the Assistant Collector. Sang the Khanum in a low voice, the saint-poet's

"The deed is done, the victory won.
Does it matter who did it?
You, I, they, he, we, 'tis all the same."

And there in their hour of triumph leave we these leaders of another age to whom the work was infinitely more than the credit. Noble by intent no less than by instinct, honouring God and fearing no man, they faced whatever came their way, justice and the public interest almost always their goal.

So, farewell friends. And with us all, the blessing and mercy of the Most High!